

Bayugin



Steven James Fluckiger

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Steven James Fluckiger

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While parts of this book are inspired by actual events recorded by European missionaries and Spanish authorities in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Philippines, this novel is a work of fiction and should not be cited or interpreted as literal or actual history.

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*This book is dedicated to all the Gabriels in my life. Thank you
for loving me unconditionally.*

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Preface

Content warning: sexual violence and spiritual abuse.

This book is the manifestation of a dream that began to formulate in 2012. As I became more familiar with and knowledgeable in Philippine history, the more I wanted people to know about the country and its history. Unfortunately, society and media tend to be more fascinated with the histories of more 'advanced' civilizations, like European, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Islamic history. The histories of billions of people have been lost to time, and there is very little interest in their lives and stories. I wanted to contribute to advancing Philippine history in society. With more international media portraying Philippine history, my hope is that interest will grow in this area. This book is my attempt to contribute to the creation of that media.

Whenever people ask me why I studied Philippine history at the universities I attended, they often ask whether I have any Filipino blood. In truth, my heritage is entirely of European origin, primarily from Switzerland and England. My last name originates from the German-speaking villages outside of Bern, Switzerland. Due to my time in the Philippines, however, I

do feel as though many Filipino families have adopted me. Many would consider that I have a relatively decent grasp of the Tagalog/Filipino language. I have spent more than a year living in Makati, Pangasinan, and Cagayan province. More dramatically, I dedicated my master's degree to the history of this country. While these things do not qualify me to be Filipino, I hope they at least show a part of my devotion and sincerity to the subject.

While living in the Philippines, I often encountered Filipinos who showed little interest in their history. Many political groups were also actively rewriting Philippine history to erase the crimes of past leaders. Perhaps this is selfish, but I want Filipinos to know their history and to be proud of it. Their history is so complex and beautiful. It feels like a waste that Western history is frequently exalted in the Philippines while Philippine history is ignored, or worse, revised.

The ultimate goal of this novel is to contribute to public discussions revolving around the history of the Philippines. The more materials and art that exist on the topic, the more likely people will start appreciating said topic. I genuinely hope that the few people who read this book will walk away with a greater appreciation of the Republic of the Philippines and its history.

This novel takes place during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Philippines, specifically around the Manila area. The Tagalog people are the indigenous people of this region, and during this period, they were being colonized by what would later become known as the Spanish Empire. This book focuses mainly on the themes of gender and religion within the context of European colonization.

Like many Southeast Asian nations and cultures, the Philippines has a long history of gender fluidity. Today, the *bakla* (assigned male at birth living a feminine life) and the *tomboy* (assigned female at birth living a masculine life) are the most common examples used for gender fluidity and ‘gender crossing’ in the country. During the sixteenth century, the Tagalog predecessor of the *bakla* was the *binabae* (literally “became a woman”). Certain *binabae* would take on the priesthood of the indigenous animist religion and become what was known as *bayugin*.

This novel will feature *bayugin* characters. To this day, I still struggle with the pronouns that should be given to the *bayugin* or the *binabae*. My Western upbringing is prone to use ‘she/her’ pronouns, given their feminine nature. Tagalog, however, did not have gendered pronouns in the seventeenth

century and still lacks them today. Because of this, I have opted to use the pronouns 'they/them' for the *bayugin*. Ultimately, all Tagalog people would have had and do have the same pronouns regardless of their gender.

From my twenty-first-century experiences in the Philippines, I saw how sexual orientation was often conflated with gender identity. When asking about my orientation, people would frequently ask me what gender I was instead of asking if I was gay. I am making the broad assumption that this intertwined nature of sexual orientation and gender identity existed in the precolonial Philippines. It is important to remember that modern concepts of homosexuality and transgender people are relatively new and that such concepts, including distinctions between the two, did not exist before the nineteenth century.

I began writing this book in 2019 and took several breaks. My biggest fear with this novel was presenting historical inaccuracies. I finally came to the conclusion that history is constantly evolving, and there is no shame in presenting facts as we see them as long as we are open to correction. With that said, I encourage anyone who can prove me wrong to correct me publicly and privately. If this entire novel is incorrect and a group of people refute everything I have written, then my goal has been

met. Refuting my claims and stories is a sign of interest in Philippine history.

Another issue I had during the writing period was being a white historian trying to write from the perspective of an early-modern Tagalog. After much internal debate, I came to the conclusion that nobody alive today, including modern-day Tagalogs, live in the same world that the precolonial Tagalogs lived in. Their world must be reconstructed by anyone writing about them. There are benefits from the descendants of the ancient Tagalogs to write about their ancestors. Still, as a historian, I see there is also a benefit of outside perspectives to help balance the overall historical narrative. The balance of local and foreign historians keeps the dialogue less nationalist and more humanized.

To help keep the text more 'indigenous,' I quote Jose Rizal at the beginning of every chapter. A list of these quotes and their sources can be found in 'Appendix A.' Each chapter is also titled after a word from a seventeenth-century Spanish-Tagalog dictionary, one of the first dictionaries in the Tagalog language. Definitions and sources can be found in 'Appendix B.' I understand that quoting both Jose Rizal and Spanish missionaries who wrote a Tagalog dictionary is not incorporating

the quotations of the subjects of this book – the ancient Tagalog people themselves. Unfortunately, there is currently a dearth of sources written by the seventeenth-century Tagalog people, and I am utilizing what I believe will be most helpful and relatable.

I chose to keep many details in the book vague due to my own lack of knowledge. There are certainly historians and anthropologists who know much more about several topics in Philippine history than I do. I am mostly trying to present my knowledge and research in an unorthodox way that is more palatable to the masses and less technical and specialist-specific.

Lastly, I need to note that I have never been Catholic. I have studied the Catholic Church for years and spent a year or more frequently attending masses in the Philippines and the United States. I have also unsuccessfully sought Catholic baptism and catechisms multiple times in the United States. My religious upbringing was Mormon, which I view as generally a more extreme religion than Catholicism. I do project my experiences of Mormonism onto the characters of the book, who are learning about Catholicism. This was done to add depth and realism to the characters, particularly involving their internal struggles. I understand that this might lead to inconsistencies

regarding Catholic devotion. Still, as both religions are hierarchical, Christian, and oppressive, I am not particularly concerned with portraying Catholicism through a Mormon lens.

If Russell Nelson, Dallin Oaks, and Evan Schmutz took sexual violence seriously, I would still be a Mormon today, and this book would have had a very different tone, though the same plot. To paraphrase Alma of the Book of Mormon, these three men murdered me. They led me away to destruction as they sat on the knowledge of sexual violence I directly gave to them for thirteen months before taking any action on the issue. Since the Mormon Church is a corporation with a strong and corrupt legal arm, for legal purposes, my criticisms of the Mormon Church in this paragraph and throughout this book are strictly opinions.

In the unlikely event that this book becomes somewhat popular, I will publish a scholarly analysis of the novel to help guide current and future historians to my sources. For the time being, I feel that it is not necessary.

Thank you for taking the time to read this book and showing some curiosity in the history of the Philippines.

A note about the cover of this edition ~

The cover of this book is a photograph of a *bulol* or *bulul* of the Ifugao people. The ancient Tagalog people had a similar figure called *likha*. Unfortunately, due to Catholic antagonism, almost all of these Tagalog *likha* were destroyed. Since the Ifugao people share some similarities with the precolonial Tagalog people, I decided to use the *bulol* on the cover of this edition to help readers visualize the animist religion of the Tagalog people. As of 2026, this *bulol* is currently in my possession, but I do not know the authenticity of the *bulol*. Should the Ifugao desire, I am more than happy to repatriate the *bulol* to its original peoples.

The Baybayin used on the cover are directly taken from Juan de Plasencia's *Doctrina Christiana* and are arranged into the title of the book and my name.

Chapter 1

Bayugin

*Historians write that the old inhabitants of the Philippines
venerated and deified their ancestors.*

"How long has she had this fever?"

The aged bayugin quickly invited the mother and daughter into the house after asking the mother this question. The mother was carrying her daughter, who could not have been older than five, in her arms with a bag draped over her shoulder. Tied to her waist were two chickens - a rooster and a hen - that had their legs, beaks, and wings bound with twine. The bayugin gestured for the two guests to sit on the floor. The mother set her daughter down, removed the bag and chickens, and sat on the floor with her daughter's head resting on her lap.

"Have they mated?" the bayugin asked, looking at the chickens.

"Yes," the mother responded, handing the two bound fowls over to the bayugin.

"How long has the girl had this fever?" the bayugin repeated.

The mother let out a sigh and said, "She's been like this for three days. The foreign priests in the lowlands refused to let us try any effective herbal remedies." The mother put her hand to the side of her head. "The priests have left our town for several days. I took her to the native priestesses who practice in secret in our town, but they could not heal her. That's why I came to you."

"Those foreign priests do not know what they are doing," the bayugin replied with traces of irritation in their voice.

"The townspeople said you were more experienced than the priestesses in our town," the mother said. "Even the priestesses recommended you to us."

"You are not the first to come from the lowlands," the bayugin stated. "Let us begin."

The bayugin began pulling out Chinese ceramic dishes. One of these dishes was a vase that the bayugin started to fill with rice wine. The bayugin then organized the room with all sorts of dishes, utensils, herbs, and mats.

After assembling the dishes and contents, the bayugin went to the window and called out, "Lawahin! We need to do a healing ceremony!" The bayugin then began putting on clothing reserved for such ceremonies. The clothing was feminine, as were the bayugin's mannerisms, but the bayugin was male-assigned at birth. Once the clothes were put on, the bayugin started to braid their hair.

Lawahin, a woman in her twenties, entered the house. "This is my acolyte Lawahin," the bayugin told the mother. The bayugin proceeded to lay a mat out in the center of the house. "Please," they continued, "lay your daughter on this mat."

The mother complied and placed her daughter on a mat. The bayugin approached the child, standing almost directly above her. They pulled out a crocodile tooth tied to a string and began subtly swinging it above the girl.

The bayugin kept their gaze sternly on the tooth, ensuring to pay no attention to the guests in the house or any other distraction. "Is this ailment caused by ancestors?" the bayugin asked no one in particular while watching the dangling tooth earnestly. "No, it's not," they responded.

"Is this ailment caused by the anito of sickness?" the bayugin asked, still dangling the tooth. "No," they paused.

"Are the souls of this girl separated?" The tooth shook ever so slightly after this question was asked. "That's it."

The bayugin put the tooth away. They took the hen and held her tightly in their arms. Lawahin brought a ceramic bowl to the bayugin, laid it in front of them, and forced the head of the hen above it. The bayugin and Lawahin began chanting indecipherable words that seemed to have come from an ancient and forgotten language. The bayugin picked up a knife and carefully slit the hen's throat. Blood poured out into the bowl as Lawahin continued to hold the head in place, ensuring that the bowl would catch all the blood.

This was repeated with the rooster, and the two spiritual practitioners poured his blood into the same bowl that caught the hen's blood. Once drained of his blood, the bayugin placed the dead birds to the side and began stirring the blood with their finger. Mixing the blood of chickens of opposite genders was considered to be particularly powerful, as it combined the power of both genders. The ancients believed the combination of the two sexes helped intervene with the souls in the unseen world of spirits.

The bayugin took the tip of their braid and dipped it in the blood. They then took the bloodied tip of their braid and

brushed it on the forehead of the sick girl, chanting more indecipherable words.

Lawahin poured some of the chicken blood into the vase that contained rice wine. She handed the vase to the bayugin, who began to drink from it generously.

After drinking plenty of the bloodied concoction, the bayugin turned to the mother and said, "Your daughter's guardian soul has wandered away from her. Though the other soul remains with your daughter, I need to retrieve the guardian soul. The anitos made it known to me that this is the cause of her illness. Once the souls are reunited, your daughter shall be healed."

An absent guardian soul left its host victim to the mercy of all manner of supernatural forces, particularly evil ones. The guardian soul could only protect its host when it was spiritually present with her.

The bayugin continued to chant and mutter in the unknown language. They began applying herbs and ointments to the girl's head, arms, neck, and legs. Lawahin took a banana leaf and began scraping ancient letters onto the leaf, writing a prayer of sorts. Once complete, she burned the leaf and collected its ashes into a small vase. She then filled the vase with rice wine,

mixed the ashes with the wine, and put the vase to the lips of the girl. The girl, barely conscious at this point, drank as Lawahin gently poured all the wine into her mouth.

Once done anointing the girl with various plants and oils, the bayugin began chanting louder and swaying slightly back and forth into what appeared to be the beginnings of a dance. Lawahin retrieved a flute from a different part of the room and began to play prolonged notes, harmonizing with the bayugin's movements slowly.

"I will go find the guardian soul of your daughter," the bayugin told the mother. "I will make sure that both of your daughters' souls are reunited." They then went to the side of the room, slowly descended to the ground, and began convulsing. Lawahin continued to play her flute at the same tempo she started with.

This grand scene did not faze the mother or her slightly conscious daughter. They both knew that it was all part of the ceremony - the bayugin was entering the invisible world of spirits to find the lost soul. The mother patiently waited while holding her daughter's head in her hands and on her lap.

The bayugin continued to convulse for several minutes. At last, they stopped. They stood up, turned towards the mother,

the daughter, and Lawahin, and proclaimed, "I have returned the guardian soul. Your daughter has been made whole again."

The mother sighed in relief, placing her hand on her chest. "Thank you," she exhaled.

Lawahin took the chickens outside and began plucking their feathers and carving them open. It was customary to eat the sacrificed animals after the ceremony. The chickens were cooked, rice was made, and the group feasted.

In the middle of the meal, the bayugin turned to the mother and said, "You don't have to go back to the lowlands. You must know that. You and your daughter could stay here."

The mother paused for a moment. "These mountains are beautiful. The isolation is soothing. Your hospitality is thoughtful. So thoughtful. There are no foreigners to be found. You do not know how wonderful it is to be away from the foreigners." She let out a hopeless sigh and paused for another moment to collect her thoughts. "But my husband and sons are in the lowlands. I can't abandon them."

"Bring them up here," the bayugin suggested. "Save your whole family. Give them all freedom."

"My husband is in Cavite," the mother said. "If the children and I leave, he will come back to nothing, if he comes back at all."

"What is he doing in Cavite?" the bayugin asked.

The mother hesitated. "The foreigners are forcing him to build ships for them for several months. It's some sort of..." the woman paused to try to describe what her husband was undergoing. "It's some sort of forced labor, slavery, tax, or debt that the government forces onto the men in repayment for their so-called protection. Many men die working in those shipyards."

The bayugin had never heard of this practice before, but they were not surprised. They knew how violent the foreigners could be.

The mother looked to her daughter, who was calmly eating. "She has an appetite now. It's the first time she had had one in days. She must be feeling better."

"She needs to rest," Lawahin stated. "You two are more than welcome to stay with us for a few days."

"I appreciate the gesture," the mother stated, "but the foreign priest is only out of the town for a few days. We need to arrive home before he comes back. We risk punishment if we run away from the lowlands, especially for seeking out a bayugin."

The priests are brutal to those who return to the original ways and abandon the foreign religion."

Understanding the severity of the situation, the bayugin caved in. "Then you must leave while there is enough daylight."

The group finished their meal, and the mother pulled out rice and small bits of golden beads from her bag. "It's the best I can offer," she said. "The foreigners demand so much of our gold."

"It is sufficient," the bayugin stated. "What matters is that your daughter is healed. Thank you."

The mother picked up her daughter, left the house, and headed towards the jungle that encircled the mountain village. The village was small, composed of a handful of houses scattered throughout various dry rice fields. All the houses rested on stilts, and most houses were small, probably only containing one room. Under each house, families housed their livestock: chickens, ducks, pigs, and goats. Despite the number of animals scattered throughout the village, the village seemed to stay silent and hidden from the world, quietly tucked away in the jungles and mountains of the interior.

The village was nestled next to a stream that flowed through the mountains. Dense jungle surrounded the village on

every side like a wall of vegetation. It allowed the dozens of inhabitants to hide from the Spanish, who were rampantly seizing control of their neighbors in the lowlands near the coasts and on the plains.

The bayugin watched as the mother and daughter disappeared into the foliage of the jungle at the edge of the village.

* * *

Days passed after the girl's healing ceremony. The bayugin continued their daily tasks, tending to the villagers' spiritual and medical needs, making ointments and oils, and disappearing into the jungle for hours to find healing herbs and to meditate. Communing with nature was one of the many ways that the bayugin stayed connected with the unseen world and was able to distance themselves from the distractions of human affairs. It also helped them master the locations of the various herbs they used in their ceremonies and medicines. On rare occasions, the bayugin believed they encountered powerful spirits in the jungle that taught them new ways to heal the sick and venerate the dead.

The bayugin was a shaman of sorts in the old religion of the Tagalog people. The 'office' of bayugin, as some Spanish

chroniclers called it, was that of a powerful medium between the physical and unseen world. The position, however, was specific. Most of the healers and mediums of the old religion were women - priestesses. The bayugin, on the other hand, was both man and woman. The combination of both sexes was seen as spiritually potent and gave the bayugin immense power in their calling. Many believed bayugins were much more powerful than priestesses because of this duality.

Hence, this bayugin was an important person in the mountain village. They had been practicing this art for over four decades, and their experience only made them more influential. Their fame spread far to neighboring villages throughout the jungles and mountains and, eventually, to the towns under Spanish control. Dozens of people traveled to seek help or healing from the bayugin when the Church or their local priestesses could not help them. In most cases, the bayugin was able to resolve these issues due to their expertise.

All of this had to be performed without the knowledge of Spanish priests. The new colonial government banned the practice of any religion except Catholicism. Returning to the old religion was punished with physical consequences. So, the Tagalogs under the control of the Spanish performed the

ceremonies in secret with their local priestesses. If the priestesses were unsuccessful, the braver villagers would seek out the bayugin when they had the chance to escape their towns. Many would not return to the Spanish towns after reexperiencing freedom away from the Spanish. Such desertions were frequent enough to trouble the Spanish priests. Their workforce was running away from them. Therefore, through brutal punishments, the Spanish priests did what they could to end the desertions.

* * *

One early morning, the bayugin journeyed into the jungle to collect medicinal plants. They began returning to the mountain village by mid-morning, but something was amiss with the village. It was oddly quiet. The villagers were not out and about tending their fields or trading their goods. The livestock made little noise. The regular bustle of the village was utterly absent.

The closer the bayugin got to the village, the clearer the situation became. A band of foreign musket men was in the village. This band was surrounding the large house of the datu, the leader of the village. The bayugin saw villagers outside of their homes whispering to each other while looking and pointing in the direction of the datu's house. Upon closer inspection, the bayugin saw that the foreigners matched the description of the

people from the lowlands that they had healed: tall, white, bearded, dressed in pants, and shielded with plates of metal. It was the Spanish. Decades of secrecy vanished as the Spanish finally found this hidden village in the mountains that had seduced their recent converts away from their towns and faith.

All security had evaporated. The village was discovered, and the foreigners were there to relocate the villagers. It was the same fate that so many other villages throughout the island had faced in the decades following the first arrival of the foreigners. It felt as if nobody was safe from these invaders. One could hide, but only temporarily. Discovery was inevitable.

Chapter 2

Anito

Terrorism is useful when the people are enslaved, when the mountains have no caves, when power places behind each tree a sentry.

The bayugin's name was Simoyin, and they did not fully realize how popular they were in the lowlands, especially among the clergy. Whispers of a powerful bayugin began spreading around in several lowland towns, and those whispers eventually made it to the ears of the colonizers. The Spanish could only take so much betrayal of the Catholic faith. Small parties of Spaniards, sometimes with priests, spent months trying to find this bayugin around the Manila area. This expedition was no different; they wanted to see this rumored bayugin and make them stop 'luring away' the feeble-hearted new converts in the lowlands.

Just as in the lowlands, Simoyin was an important person in their mountain village. Seeing foreigners inside the village was harrowing. Simoyin knew the rumors - these people would end the ancient worshipping practices and healing ceremonies and force those who came under their power to accept their religion. The arrival of these terrifying guests threatened Simoyin's very identity as a spiritual medium. The foreigners would also force the village to relocate to ensure Simoyin would not be able to continue their ancient practices.

Simoyin proceeded to enter the datu's house, a privilege they had because of the close friendship they had with the datu and the high status they held in the village as a bayugin. The foreign musket men surrounding the house were unfazed due to Simoyin's old age. Unlike the single-roomed 'huts' that most of the villagers lived in, the datu's house was large and spacious with multiple rooms. Simoyin followed the sound of chatter until they found themselves outside the room where the datu was. They could distinguish three voices: one of an unrecognizable foreign tongue, the datu's voice, and the voice of a foreigner who spoke in both Tagalog and what was assumed to be the other's foreign language.

"Those who bow before the cross and God Almighty will be spared," stated the bilingual in Tagalog. "Both in this life and in the next."

"Who is this 'God' you speak of?" the datu asked.

"He is the most powerful of all the anitos," the bilingual responded. "Indeed, he is the only anito. A jealous anito. An anito above all anitos, both ancestral and immortal. And you must bow to him and him only and abandon all other anitos or suffer eternal torment."

"How do you know that God is the most powerful anito?" the datu responded. "What proof do you have?"

They were arguing about religion. Simoyin knew it was the foreigners' feeble attempt to convince the datu to willingly convert to their religion, something that the datu was clearly skeptical about.

"God has enabled us to overcome your anitos," the bilingual answered. "And he has healed and blessed many of the Tagalogs in the lowlands. Thousands of your neighbors have come to the feet of God."

"What if we reject this God?" the datu replied.

"The king requires you to abandon your anitos regardless of your acceptance of God," the bilingual speaker

said. "Those who continue to practice these native customs will be punished by the laws of Spain and the laws of God."

"Why can't we continue to practice our sacred beliefs?" the datu asked.

"Because your anitos are evil and seek to cause harm to you and your people," the bilingual stated. "They want you to spend an eternity in a lake of fire and brimstone. Their goal is to keep you from the mercy and love of God."

"Our anitos created us and have helped us for thousands of years," the datu responded. "They have fed us. Healed us. Protected and guided us during war. Why end the worship of these powerful beings to please you and your God?"

"Because it is the law now," the bilingual retorted, "and all will be expected to follow the laws of Spain if you want our protection."

"And you want us to resettle to the lowlands," the datu said.

"How else can we protect you if you do not move to our town?" the bilingual responded. "Our town is in the mountains still, a few miles away from here, facing the bay. It has a church, enabling you and your people to worship the one true God with us and your humble neighbors."

The two foreigners began speaking in their language for a bit in a very serious tone. Then the bilingual spoke in Tagalog: "The morning is almost spent, and we will run out of sunlight. We need to move your people now. Do you willingly accept this plan to relocate?"

Simoyin knew the villagers had no choice. Either the datu accepts it and saves himself, or rejects it and is killed. And if he is killed, many others would be killed with him. All survivors would be forced into the towns in the lowlands. The villagers could go with the foreigners unharmed, or go with them bleeding and crippled.

There was a long pause. After some time, the two foreigners bickered with each other in their own language. The datu remained silent as the two bitterly argued. Eventually, the datu interrupted the two of them: "I accept."

"Excellent," the bilingual stated. "We will start their preparations as soon..."

The datu interrupted him. "Let me tell my people what is happening. They need to hear it from me. Not from you."

The datu left the room with two of his warriors behind him. He made eye contact with Simoyin. It was clear that the datu was exhausted from the conversations and unsure of the

decision he had just made. He exited his home and summoned the villagers to gather around the house.

"We all knew that this day would eventually come," he told the people within earshot. "I am sorry that it came sooner than we had hoped. But what choice do we have now? Either we leave alive or are dragged bloodied."

Whispers began permeating the crowd. While the reaction was mixed, it was clear that the people would accept the command. They knew what the Spanish were capable of, and all that they heard about the Spanish from the others were terrifying and violent stories.

"Gather your belongings," the datu announced. "Spread the word. They want us to leave today."

Baffled, the people murmured among themselves for a bit. Some began heading back to their houses to collect whatever things they could carry. Others began weeping at the thought of abandoning the homes and livelihoods they had in the mountains. A few stood in shock and seemed to wait for their datu to give them more directions or to tell them this whole migration was optional.

Simoyin emerged from the datu's house. "I am not going," they told the datu. They then began walking to their house, avoiding everyone they could.

At this point, the bilingual had left the datu's house and immediately saw Simoyin walking away towards their home. At first, the bilingual was not sure if they were a bayugin or a priestess. He rushed after them. The main reason the foreigners came to the mountains was to find the bayugin, and he was not going to leave the village without 'subduing' the infamous religious leader. As the bilingual got closer, he saw that Simoyin was, indeed, a bayugin. He began to run faster in Simoyin's direction. He was *not* going to lose them. As he came into Simoyin's view, they could see that this foreign man, who was probably in his thirties, was wearing black robes that looked like a dress.

Pointing to Simoyin, the bilingual shouted in Tagalog to the datu, who was still outside his home in the distance. "This sorcerer must come with us. He has had too much influence in our towns!"

Simoyin rebutted to the bilingual, "I want nothing to do with your anito nor your people. Leave me be here in my home. I will not die in the land of strangers!"

The bilingual summoned two of the musket men and had them encircle Simoyin. "We will not risk letting you stay here," the bilingual demanded. "Have you not seduced enough people?"

"I have not forced them from their homes or their anitos," they responded. "Leave me be!"

Simoyin did not want to lose everything they worked for. What would their life be like as an old person in the lowlands, unable to continue their livelihood? Death, something the bayugin continuously worked with for decades, did not scare them. Living a life of servitude to the Spanish, however, was one of the few thoughts that made their blood run cold.

Their demand did not pacify the bilingual or his musket men. "We cannot let you be. We have left you alone for decades, and you continue to lure the Lord's flock away from us!" The bilingual gestured to the musket men, and the two men pointed their muskets at Simoyin. "Either you leave with us alive or stay here dead."

Simoyin stopped in their tracks. They turned around and looked down the barrels of each of the muskets. Letting out a long sigh, Simoyin responded, "Kill me, then. I choose the honorable death."

Lawahin, who witnessed the entire scene involving Simoyin and the bilingual, ran to the bayugin and tried to reason with them. "Your cause is noble and just," she told them, "but we cannot win. Even dying an honorable death will not help the people of the village, and I think you know that."

Simoyin stood in a pensive silence as a rumble of the village's migratory preparations bellowed on in the distance.

"I need you, Simoyin," Lawahin said. "I need you alive!"

Simoyin looked down at the ground and began to tremble. The thought of leaving their home, their religion, and their jungles scared them. They would rather be killed than to give up everything they had known for their long life.

"If you are killed," Lawahin continued, "you know they will kill others, too. How can your death help the others if the others lie down and die with you? Can't you do more by submitting, living, and helping the others than encouraging them to die?"

Simoyin was still not convinced. Death would be an honorable consequence for refusing their brutality. They established a reputation with several of the anitos, their deceased ancestors, and the ancestors of the villagers. Being murdered for these spiritual beings would be more honorable

than to forsake them after a lifetime of service to them in an act of cowardice.

"I cannot leave with them," Simoyin told Lawahin. "I cannot and will not abandon the anitos."

"I know you cannot," Lawahin told them, "but you are stronger than this. If you give up, how many others will give up with you? How many people will follow your example and choose death over life? Would the anitos want you to die for them at the cost of their descendants and followers being killed as well?"

Lawahin's comment pierced Simoyin. This decision was no longer about their old age and giving up after several years. Lawahin turned the decision from Simoyin's liberty to the anitos wishing for the safety of the villagers that the two of them had worked with for years. If Simoyin surrendered to death, how many others would follow their example?

Simoyin surrendered to Lawahin's logic. "You're right. Of course you're right. The people will lie down to their deaths with me. They know the power of the anitos just as well as I do."

They turned to the bilingual and humbly said, "I will go down with you. Not because I want to, but because of what I know you would do to the people without me."

The bilingual responded with a look of disgust. He got what he wanted, but he was insulted that the bayugin would assume that the Church would hurt anybody. The Church was there to save souls!

Simoyin then turned to Lawahin, "Please, help me gather my things."

Chapter 3

Katalonan

The most optimistic imagine that their great grandparents still roast in purgatory.

An organized chaos descended upon the village as the people began hand-picking what they needed to take with them and what to leave behind. This sudden displacement was nothing new to them – the older members of the village remembered the days of old when they were forced to flee from enemy villages in the south that would threaten to slaughter their people. As was customary under these looming attacks, the villagers would pack what little supplies they could and burn their village to the ground. The group would then wander further west into the jungles until they found a patch of land flat enough with sufficient sources of fresh water. They would slash the vegetation, burn the husks and tree trunks, and establish their new home village and dry rice farms.

In the bustle of the dozens of villagers packing their belongings, Simoyin made their way back to their home, sat on one of the rungs of the ladder that entered into their house, and looked upon the village that they had known for so many years. What choice did they have? They knew the foreigners outnumbered them. Even if they refused the foreigners and their army and somehow survived, more would come from the lowlands to attack them and force them from their homes.

Simoyin sighed as they thought of all the miracles and spiritual experiences that happened in the village. They would have to abandon all of this to appease these aggressive visitors. Slowly coming to terms with the gravity and inevitability of their situation, Simoyin climbed into their house, collected some Chinese ceramics, clothing, gold, food, and various items used for the ceremonies with the unseen world.

The bayugin made their way to the corner of their home where several humanoid figurines were placed, both uncovered and covered with expensive fabrics. These figurines were effigies of the anitos whom the bayugin and the villagers revered. Some were the anitos of the local area and surrounding landscape. Simoyin cautiously left these images behind. Wherever they were going, these specific effigies would have no

power once disconnected from the land that they live in and serve. Instead, Simoyin began to pack and protect the images of deceased ancestors, the ancient founders of their village, and the more powerful anitos that could span larger swaths of land and served all the Tagalogs, regardless of their physical location. Simoyin meticulously covered, ordered, and packed these specific figurines into several bags, baskets, and pots to ensure they would safely and secretly make their way to the land the foreigners were dragging their people to.

Simoyin made their way outside of their home with their goods and headed towards Lawahin's home. They quietly summoned Lawahin, who was busy collecting her things, to come and assist with the transport of the images. Lawahin, ever diligent and faithful, dropped what she was doing and went to help Simoyin.

The two began exchanging various bags, pots, and baskets when a foreign soldier came and knocked the two to the ground. The bilingual foreigner approached them, grimaced, and began going through their things. One by one, he tore the images out of their hiding places and dropped them on the ground.

“You demonic servants thought you could wistfully bring your idols with you?” he bellowed at the two as he picked up one of the figurines and held it in the air above his head. Without warning, he threw it on the ground, almost hitting Lawahin with it, and spat on the sacred object.

Simoyin felt their face burn with fury as they watched the bilingual desecrate the images of the anitos. They knew the foreigners were dangerous and violent, but they were not prepared for how blasphemous and prideful these foreigners were. The foreigners could force their anito onto them and demand reverence and respect, but they could turn to all the other anitos and defile them? And they did this all after threatening Simoyin’s life for refusing to submit.

The bayugin uncontrollably lunged towards the image of the anito. They picked it up, rubbed the dirt and the saliva from it, and began to wrap it in the fine cloth that the bilingual tore it out of. The bilingual responded by kicking Simoyin, despite their old age, and shoving them away from the image and their sacred items. He turned to the soldier next to him and muttered something in their foreign language.

Simoyin laid helplessly on the ground, refusing to open their eyes. The soldier went to the pile of images that he had

forced Simoyin and Lawahin away from and picked up an empty pot. Lawahin watched the soldier walk towards an extinguished fire pit next to a neighbor's home and scoop up the few smoldering coals and wood left from an earlier fire. The soldier returned to the pile of images and began dropping the coals and heated wood directly onto the desecrated figurines. He assorted the baskets atop of the coals until they caught fire. After seeing the flame reignited, he turned to Lawahin's house and began pulling the dry leaves that made the roof of her simple home. The fire grew as the soldier fed more and more dry vegetation into the flames.

The bilingual, not missing a moment, picked up the image he had desecrated and threw it into the fire. The soldier and the bilingual began collecting the various images Simoyin and Lawahin tried to exchange with each other. Both of the men carelessly dumped all of these images into the fire.

During their rampage, the bilingual picked up an image and noticed that it was covered in a thin layer of pliable gold. He muttered something to himself in his foreign tongue and began to strip the gold off the image. Once the gold was collected and safe in his pocket, he held the naked image in his hand, turned to Lawahin and Simoyin, and said, "These barbaric monsters you

two have created and collected are consigned to the infernal flames to which they came! Do not bring your grotesque practices with you to the lowlands! We will allow none of that under our care!”

Simoyin finally opened their eyes after the bilingual professed his threat to the two of them. The bilingual, making direct eye contact with Simoyin, threw the image into the fire with a cruel smile on his face. After being satisfied with the evil he had just committed, the bilingual turned around and shouted to the villagers within the sound of his voice, “Burn your idols! You cannot bring them with you! Those who bring idols with them shall be flogged!”

The bilingual turned to his soldier, said something in their language, and the soldier began searching the houses. Simoyin and Lawahin watched the soldier enter each of their homes and come out with armfuls of images and sacred items. With no emotion, the soldier apathetically threw all of these holy items and images into the fire. Infused with a sadistic pleasure, the bilingual began going about the village and telling each and every villager that they were required to burn their ‘false idols’ to avoid physical punishments. The bewildered villagers obliged,

entered their homes, collected their images and sacred items, and threw them into the fire.

Lawahin watched the fire grow as the villagers regrettably and forcefully added the effigies of their ancestors to the fire. Each time an image was consigned to the flames, she thought she heard an invisible scream echoing from the souls of the anitos the images represented.

Simoyin, unable to bear the savagery that was happening feet away from their injured body, turned away. For a moment, they thought it would have been better for the Tagalog practitioners themselves to be burned at the stake rather than the images of the anitos be burned. Why live a life where the anitos are senselessly brutalized in front of the people who worshipped them? The people of the village were the very descendants of the anitos! Was this just a fraction of the horror that the villagers would face as they followed the foreigners to whatever terrible land they had prepared for them?

A soldier broke Simoyin's train of thought with a kick. Simoyin looked up to hear the soldier ordering them to do something in the foreign language. The soldier pointed to Simoyin's items that were not being burned and made a motion with his arms to pick them up. Simoyin complied and slowly

stood up, doing their best to ignore the pain they felt where they were shoved and kicked. Lawahin followed suit, and the two collected their things and slowly walked away from the fire.

Chapter 4

Simbahan

After all, what is it to you that he fools these poor gullible Indios?

They should be smarter.

The foreigners with their small army gave the villagers a few hours to pack their things before 'escorting' them out of the village. The group of roughly two hundred people trudged through the jungle throughout the day until they reached a corridor carved out in the mountain. They followed this corridor until they arrived at a town at the mouth of this corridor that rested on the edge of the mountains. This town overlooked Manila and its bay miles away to the west. The sun was beginning to slowly set into the ocean as the villagers approached the town.

As the group approached the town, they noticed large pieces of land filled with water being used for rice paddies. The people heard that some of the Tagalogs who lived near the

massive lake east of Manila used the lake's water to flood their fields and grow their rice, but they did not realize the foreigners also took advantage of this form of farming. They felt as if they were in a foreign land, but so many aspects of this new place felt familiar to them. It was a nostalgic yet harrowing feeling.

The villagers walked through a road that went through the rice paddies before arriving at what appeared to be the center of the town. Dozens of houses could be seen crammed together towards the town center. At the center of the town lay a plaza surrounded by several large homes, like the homes of the datus. One of these 'homes' was lacking livestock around its base and had a steeple atop it with a cross at the peak. The villagers had never seen architecture like this before.

The foreigners led the villagers through the plaza and took them to a nearby stream where a pavilion was built next to the edge. Though the plaza would have been the perfect gathering place, the foreigners preferred to be by the stream. It was moderately cooler by the stream than at the plaza, and the pavilion offered shade for the foreigners and whatever fortunate villagers that were able to make their way into the pavilion. The villagers filled the pavilion to capacity, and the others spilled out

onto the grounds outside the pavilion exposed to the setting sunlight.

"All of this is the town of San Tadeo," the bilingual began. "From now on, San Tadeo will be your home and your shelter. Most people from this town have also been relocated from the mountains to the east. We have relocated all of you for your protection and spiritual guidance. The townspeople here have offered to take you into their homes for the evening, and you will have the opportunity to build yourselves new houses beginning tomorrow."

The bilingual continued, "Your datu and I talked earlier about the laws of the land now. We are under the jurisdiction of the merciful King of Spain, and you must submit to him. Your datu has offered to explain more of this to you."

The datu, who was standing next to the bilingual, hesitated at first, but then began to speak. "The anitos we honor and worship - we cannot revere them anymore. If we do, the consequences will be severe, as you saw earlier today in the village. We must pay tribute and taxes to these new people. We have to follow their laws and orders."

As he spoke, a look of worry grew on the faces of his audience.

"We are doing all of this to survive," he continued. "We are lucky they did not attack our village and kill our people like some foreigners did to so many others." He took a long breath. "If you submit, you will live. This is how we stay alive. The choice was not easy, but I would rather have us peacefully transition rather than violently forced into this town."

The bilingual felt satisfied by the datu's words, though unimpressed with the lack of enthusiasm. The foreigner was merely pleasing the King, the Pope, and God. What he was doing for these people was one of the highest acts of service and charity! Only he and his brothers, the clergy of the Church, could redeem these heathens from hell! Despite this, the bilingual knew it would take time for the villagers to see the good he was doing. Hopefully, just hopefully, this man could baptize these newcomers and work with them to ensure they would make it to purgatory.

"I am Father Esteban Arzaga," the bilingual stated. "I will be your spiritual leader. Father Pedro de la Cruz will also be your spiritual leader. You will meet him another day. As you surely will notice, Father Cruz and I are the only foreigners in San Tadeo. From now on, we are your priests. We will bring you to the one true anito: God. Through God, you will be saved."

Arzaga gauged his audience for a reaction. It was beyond clear that the villagers were tired from their exciting morning and long walk west. Most seemed to be staring into the distance, unable to come to terms with what had just happened to them. Simply put, the people were traumatized. Arzaga silently thought to himself, "They need milk before they can move onto meat."

"Your former sorcerers, witches, and priestesses will submit to our authority and to God," he spoke aloud to the crowd. "You must all abandon your anitos regardless of whether you choose to follow God or not. Those who go to the witches and the anitos will be punished. We cannot risk the devil, the enemy of God, to have more power in this town than he already has."

Arzaga continued with his listing of expectations and laws to the villagers, most of which fell on deaf ears due to the traumatic event they had just experienced. Once satisfied with all that he said, he ordered the townspeople of San Tadeo, all Tagalogs, to come to the pavilion and to assist the newcomers with their feeding and sleeping arrangements.

The next morning, the villagers began exploring the outskirts of town looking for land to build their new homes. The

concept of abandoning one's home and creating a new one days later was nothing new to the Tagalogs, who used to leave their homes and burn down their villages to avoid raids. Perhaps if they had more notice of the Spanish arrival at their village, they would have burned their homes and fled deeper into the mountains to maintain their freedom.

After a few days, Arzaga and Cruz summoned the elderly men among the new arrivals to the steeped building. Father Cruz, a foreigner, wore similar clothes as Arzaga, suggesting they were of the same rank, but Cruz was visibly older and grayer.

"This church is your new place of worship," Arzaga told the group. "While all should come here once a week, we will expect all of you in attendance today to come daily. Here, we will teach you the one true faith, and we expect you to teach this to your children and grandchildren. You will each be assigned a child who will assist you in coming to the church daily. We do not want any absences."

As soon as Arzaga finished his brief explanation, a group of young Tagalog boys began flooding into the church, with ages ranging from five to fourteen. The priests then began to assign each boy to a man.

Among this group of elderly men was Simoyin. The priests viewed them as a man, despite Simoyin's more complex gender. Simoyin still felt defeated over abandoning their native religion, especially since their livelihood and identity had been stripped from them. Being publicly called a sorcerer only deepened their distrust, especially after all the good they had done for hundreds of ill or suffering people who came to them for help. Did Arzaga have no shame?

Cruz paired a young boy no older than eight with Simoyin. Simoyin could tell the boy was nervous. "What is your name?" they politely asked him.

"My name is Juan," the boy shyly responded. Simoyin had never heard such a name before, even from the other townsfolk who had hosted them for the past few days.

"You don't have a Tagalog name?" Simoyin asked Juan.

"Oh, my full name is Juan Bautista Gubat," Juan responded.

"Gubat," Simoyin repeated. "What a powerful name. Oh, what potential you have! But the 'Juan Bautista' is new to me. What does your name mean?"

"I am named after Juan Bautista, the man who baptized Jesus."

"Who is Jesus?" Simoyin asked.

"He is God," Juan responded.

"Jesus is your anito?" Simoyin replied.

"No, Jesus is God," Juan stated matter-of-factly. "The anitos are demons that we must avoid. They want to drag us to hell!"

Simoyin was utterly confused. A few days previous, God was referenced as an anito. Now they are being told that the anitos need to be avoided. It did not make sense to them. But Simoyin knew that they needed to survive, and to survive, they had to appease the foreigners. To appease the foreigners, they must honor whoever this God was and at least look like they were forsaking the rest of the anitos.

After a brief pause, Simoyin responded, "I am sure I will learn about all of these anitos and this Jesus or God that you told me about."

"Yep!" Juan exclaimed joyfully. "And I will be the one to take care of you as you come to the church every day."

As the two interacted, Simoyin could not help but notice that there was something feminine about this boy. When he got excited talking about religion and spirituality, he had a slight feminine mannerism in the movements of his hands and his

posture. It was ever so subtle, but Simoyin picked up on it quickly. This made Simoyin happy that this boy had been assigned to them, but also conflicted with what this new religion would mean for the boy and his future. Frequently, feminine boys took on the role of bayugin. Such a role was forbidden now. What would Juan's purpose in life be?

After tuning out the religious gibberish that Juan was spewing at them, Simoyin asked, "What do you enjoy doing at home?"

"I weave with my mother and play with our dogs and ducks," Juan said. This piqued Simoyin's curiosity - weaving was a woman's job. This young boy was most certainly different from the other boys and men.

"What do you do with your father?" Simoyin asked.

"My dad mostly farms and drinks," Juan responded with less enthusiasm. "He helped build this church," he stated, turning his head towards the ceiling of the church. This was Juan's poor attempt to avoid the question. He did not spend much time with his father, and he felt some shame in not doing so. Most of the other boys seemed to be close to their fathers or other male relatives. Juan was... different.

"Do you do anything with him, Juan?" Simoyin asked.

"No," he replied. "I only really help my mom."

Simoyin was impressed. Here was a boy who was fascinated with the spiritual and had feminine hobbies. This boy was close to his mother and worked with her. Surely in another life, this boy would have been a bayugin. But in the world of Spanish control, he was relegated to be a pious man, at most, or worse, forced to be a man that he was not.

The introductions were cut short as Arzaga and Cruz began hushing the group. The people were then instructed to sit in the church and were given directions from Cruz on what was expected. Cruz then began to preach about God and Jesus, the first part of the catechisms. Juan was already familiar with the catechisms, but he listened eagerly because the priests deemed it necessary for the boys to be taught repeatedly with the elderly.

The Spanish concept of God and the divine confused Simoyin. The Tagalogs worshipped a pantheon of anitos that had authority over various elements and events. The Christians, on the other hand, had three Gods that were one God that was over everything. To Simoyin, it did not make sense.

Then, the catechism sank deep into Simoyin's mind. They realized that they would be expected to uproot their whole worldview and their spirituality. The Spanish were not silencing

the anitos and destroying their effigies; they were erasing the memory of them. The priests wanted the Tagalogs to throw away their understanding of the unseen world, of the anitos, and of their native spirituality to replace them with the Spanish view of the world and the sacred.

These priests, Simoyin realized, had the final goal of transforming the Tagalog invisible world into a Spanish invisible world. Simoyin would have to pretend for the rest of their life to be entirely devoted to the Spanish and their religion, which meant that Simoyin would spend their final years alive hiding one of their most core and fundamental aspects of self - their own religion.

Chapter 5

Kasalanan

*His imagination saw other things besides...but who can write
what a passionate mind can imagine?*

As the weeks went on, Juan escorted Simoyin to the church daily, where Cruz taught the catechism to the old and the young. Being an older man, Cruz tended to become increasingly monotone with his explanations of the faith's tenets. Doing so made it quicker for his pupils to fall asleep or tune him out. The catechisms did not matter to most of the students - they were forced against their wills to be there.

Simoyin, on the other hand, being a person of religion, listened carefully to everything. The Spanish had yet to catch them, but they were performing medicinal ceremonies under the noses of the Spanish with great secrecy. To continue the practices in secret, they had to appear innocent, humble, and submissive. In the end, they had to appear Christian. They had

to submit fully to the Church. Simoyin was playing a perilous game, but they felt they had nothing to lose at this point. The bayugin was not going to sit silently and watch their neighbors suffer from ailments that had simple, but illegal, treatments. Simoyin knew the anitos and the spirits of the land that these foreigners had occupied. The foreigners could burn their effigies, but they could not erase their power or memory from Simoyin.

Things abruptly changed for Simoyin when the catechisms went over what was known as the 'sixth commandment' – 'Thou shall not commit adultery.' The catechisms covered all the aspects of sexual control that all baptized Catholics were expected to follow. Violating any of these arbitrary rules was a mortal sin and a criminal offense.

Making occasional glances at Simoyin, Cruz taught the people the never-ending list of Catholic rules about sexuality. Cruz did not hesitate to heavily emphasize that sexual relations must be kept between a man and his wife. "Do not do with other men as you would do with your wife," he touted while looking directly at Simoyin.

Simoyin understood what this meant - love between them and another man was not allowed. Fortunately, Simoyin was old and widowed. They did not feel the need to worry

particularly about this 'commandment,' though the information itself was helpful in their own self-preservation. The priests and the Spanish could not know of Simoyin's past life, nor their true feelings on love and gender. If these thoughts and feelings were exposed, Simoyin would face physical consequences, which was to be expected from a tyrannical entity that would physically harm someone for accepting their true identity.

At the end of this peculiar catechism on chastity, Cruz told Simoyin to stay behind. Juan remained, as well, since he had gotten in the habit of escorting Simoyin back to their home. It was Juan's only job and a religious duty. He needed to wait for Simoyin to stay on good terms with God.

Cruz began telling Simoyin, "God created man and woman in the beginning with Adam and Eve." Simoyin knew exactly what Cruz wanted to get across. "He did not create man to be a woman. You cannot be both."

Though Simoyin's heart was racing, they were mostly annoyed. "What do you mean, Father?" they responded, hoping for more information on the expectations of the Spanish.

"When you are baptized, Simoyin, you will have to do so as a man acting as a man," Cruz ordered.

"But I am not a man," Simoyin clarified, fishing for more information from the priest. "Can I not be baptized as a binabae?" Binabae was a more formal term to describe Simoyin's gender.

"In the beginning, God created Adam and Eve," Cruz repeated. "You cannot be both. And I can only assume God made you as a man." Cruz looked Simoyin up and down, paying close attention to their groin. "Do you have the organs of a man, Simoyin?" Cruz curiously questioned in a slightly perverted tone.

Simoyin felt violated, though it was not their first time being questioned about their body in this way. Men, both local and foreign, were always curious about Simoyin's body and wanted to know what it looked like. It appeared the foreigners were even more interested and forthcoming than the locals.

"Yes," Simoyin nearly whispered in response.

"May I see?" Cruz requested, suppressing hints of excitement, curiosity, and lust.

Simoyin held back many feelings, mostly disgust and fury. Who was this man to use his power to see another person naked? For a few moments, they stood in panicked silence. Then, they responded, "No, Father, it might lead me... it might lead us into temptation."

Cruz was not ready for such a spiritual answer. Simoyin's response truly dumbfounded him. Cruz's demeanor changed from carnal to disappointed.

"I assure you, my son," Cruz replied, "there will be no temptation or sin. I simply wish to know your character. We Spaniards do this all the time."

Simoyin had to refrain from raising their hand and slapping the priest. How could a man who was preaching about modesty and chastity moments ago turn around and demand one of their parishioners to expose themselves for their sexual gratification? Did Simoyin lose all autonomy of their own body in the eyes of the Church?

With a long exhale that Simoyin poorly tried to silence, they responded with, "Father, I know a man like you cannot fall into sins as such. But I do not see it wise to discuss or even perform such acts in the presence of a child."

All hints of lust flushed from Cruz's face. Perhaps the child would not be the only witness to this act. After gathering his thoughts, Cruz responded, "I am happy to see your commitment to chastity, my son."

After more menial exchange of words, Cruz finally let his captive audience go. Juan, who was just a boy and did not fully

comprehend what was being discussed, began asking a plethora of questions.

"What did the father mean by saying you must be a man?"

At first, Simoyin did not want to answer. But, given their keen insight into the kind of boy Juan was, they decided to entertain him.

"Do you know what a bayugin is? Or a binabae?"
Simoyin asked back.

"...kind of..." he responded.

"They are men in body and women in the heart."

Simoyin held back on describing the difference between a bayugin and a binabae. Binabae was a form of gender. Bayugin was a spiritual role specific to some binabae. Letting Juan know that the bayugin and, in part, the binabae had spiritual roles in the traditional religion could have created a sense of antagonism to this very devout Christian child. They decided to describe them as the same.

"So," Juan replied, "you became a woman?"

"Yes. To some extent," Simoyin stated. "However, to a degree, I am still a man. Male in body, female in heart." Simoyin

paused for a moment. "But the Spanish do not see me as that. They see me as a man and only a man."

"But you dress as a woman and act like a woman," Juan said.

"Yes. Just as many of us have done for several generations," Simoyin stated. "In fact, it was like that since the beginning."

"Since the beginning? Since the creation?"

"The first man and the first woman were Malakas and Maganda: man and woman. The Spanish call them Adam and Eve. But there have been anitos that were both man and woman."

"But the anitos are evil," Juan responded.

Simoyin paused. Perhaps this boy was not ready for what they were telling him. They thought for a little longer and came up with a response, "The fathers teach that the devil has been here from the beginning, correct?"

"Yes, since Adam and Eve," Juan said. "He was a snake in the garden."

"So have the anitos," Simonyin said. "The anitos have existed long before Malakas and Maganda. There is even an anito that is both male and female, just like a bayugin."

"So bayugins have been around forever?" he asked.

"Yes. The fathers just don't... understand it." Simoyin carefully explained. "I think they're new to all of this."

With no warning, Juan asked, "Are you getting baptized?"

Simoyin sighed. "Yes, I fear I must get baptized."

"Why fear? It's not that scary! I got baptized! It was great!"

"It's not scary for you because you are a boy," Simoyin said. "You were already a boy when you were baptized. You didn't have to change your gender – your identity – to be baptized."

The explanation went over Juan's head. Instead of staying on topic, he blurted out, "But boys can do so much more than girls. Why wouldn't you want to be a man?" Though Simoyin wanted to protest this blatant outburst, the boy's words gave Simoyin more insight into Spanish expectations of gender.

The two arrived at Simoyin's house. "Thank you for walking me home, Juan. Tell your mother I said hello."

The two parted ways, and Simoyin climbed into their house. Lawahin, who lived with Simoyin, greeted them.

"Lawahin," Simoyin started, "things are worse than I thought. They want me to become a man."

"At your age? After a lifetime of being a binabae?" Lawahin asked.

"How much more do they want from me?" Simoyin cried. "They took my anitos. They took my home. Now they want to take my identity? What more can they take?"

Lawahin sat in silence. She did not know what to say or how to react. Honestly, she was not surprised by the announcement because of how violent the Spanish had been towards the two of them, but she could tell this hurt Simoyin deeply.

After pondering in silence, Lawahin quietly spoke up. "We are still performing the healings. The town needs us. We have to stay alive."

"At what price? Giving up everything that we are?" Simoyin responded.

"For the sake of the community, yes," Lawahin stated. "They were the only thing that kept you from sacrificing yourself to the Spanish back in the mountains. You chose to give everything up for them."

Simoyin sighed. "You're right," they finally said after spending some time thinking. "The worst they could do to me is kill me. As if they haven't done that already."

"They can take everything away from you, away from us," Lawahin said. "They have already taken everything away! But they can never take away our gifts or our knowledge. That is the one thing that takes years to build and years to tear down. We will have to stay several steps ahead of them. Fortunately, we are already used to them taking away everything from us."

Simoyin sighed again and turned their eyes to the floor. "If I am going to have to deny myself of my own identity and become a man," they said, "we might as well get married to comply even more with their ridiculous rules."

Without any hesitation, Lawahin responded, "Brilliant!"

Chapter 6

Binabae

Here, all independent thought, all words which are not an echo of the will of the powerful, are judged as subversion, and you know very well what that means.

Several more weeks passed, and Simoyin was given a 'special' visit from Father Cruz. The visit was so important that he came unannounced.

"Easter Sunday is approaching," he told the bayugin.

"We will be doing a few baptisms."

"It will be a busy time for you, Father," Simoyin said.

"You will get baptized on that day," he told them.

"What?" they answered. "This soon? I think I need more time to prepare myself. Isn't it my choice?" Catholic theology made it clear that adults must choose to be baptized and cannot be forced to do so. But everyone occasionally breaks rules when

they wield power, especially if they believe doing so will bring several positive consequences.

"You *will* choose to get baptized on Easter," Cruz demanded. "Too many people in the town are refusing baptism. That will change once you get baptized. Seeing their old spiritual pillar, their stumbling block, accepting baptism will change their hearts and minds."

"And I must be baptized as a man?" Simoyin asked.

"Yes," he responded. "That is what you are. Stop this womanish nonsense that the devil holds you captive with. Stand firm and be a man."

"I am not ready for that," Simoyin responded.

"You *will* choose to get baptized. And you will forsake this sodomy nonsense!"

"And if I don't get baptized?" they asked.

"Do not make me punish you," Cruz huffed.

"And if I don't?" Simoyin repeated. Simoyin knew they needed to comply and get baptized. However, after months of interactions, Simoyin needed to know how long they could hold onto their identity – their gender. In the end, Simoyin needed to know the boundaries of the priests for the sake of self-preservation.

Cruz, clearly frustrated, stated, "You will be tried and burned for the crime against nature as required by the law."

Simoyin froze. "The crime against nature? How? I live with Lawahin. What evidence do you have?"

"Your womanish mannerisms are but an outward expression of your secretive and lewd acts," Cruz murmured, glaring at Simoyin's groin. "Sodomy is a grave sin."

The word 'secretive' pulled Simoyin into the reality of their situation. Though the priest was talking about sexual activities, Simoyin immediately thought of their secret spiritual activities. They could not risk having their secret healing ceremonies become known. If the Spanish found out, they would kill Simoyin and torture Lawahin. Without either of them, the town would suffer under the poor medical practices of the Spanish priests. Many more would die than just Simoyin.

After a long pause, Simoyin responded with, "Very well."

"Good," Cruz responded. "I shall have someone bring you the clothes of a man before the baptism." As he was leaving, Cruz turned around and said, "Tell Lawahin that she will be getting baptized, as well, since she is also a sorceress. We cannot risk blundering this sacred opportunity to turn all of these children to God. No lose ends, my son!"

* * *

Simoyin spent the night trying to understand what would happen next. What would the anitos think? Would the anitos punish them for submitting to God and the Spanish? Simoyin's entire worldview was changing before their eyes. They did not know what lay on the other side of what the Spanish wanted, but they knew they had to submit.

"Lawahin," Simoyin asked, "could the foreigner's God really be this powerful? The foreigners burned the images of the anitos in the mountain with seemingly no consequences. They desecrated all that was sacred to the anitos, and yet the foreigners still walk free and unharmed. Are they under the protection of their anito?"

"I have heard rumors from the people," she responded. "Someone told me a story of a balete tree that lay in the center of the town. The balete tree was a host to several spirits, and the people refused to touch the tree lest they get cursed. They chose to respect the spirits, telling the Spanish that these spirits were devils and that they could not remove the tree. They hoped demonizing the spirits would have kept the Spanish from interfering."

Lawahin continued, "Cruz wanted to build the church where the balete tree was to usurp the power of the spirits. The people told him they could not touch the tree for fear of punishment from the spirits. I have been told that Cruz approached the tree, did the sign of the cross, pulled his crucifix out, and placed it on the tree."

Simoyin was baffled. Were these foreigners stupid? Touching sacred trees can lead to various health issues - fevers, blisters, and even tumors. Why would Cruz be so foolish as to touch the tree?

"Several days passed, and the people saw that Cruz had not fallen ill. He then told a few of the men to fell the tree. They did, and they did not fall ill, either."

Simoyin huffed. "So, this God is powerful? More powerful than the spirits?"

"Simoyin," Lawahin started, "think of how powerful these men are. They have their guns, cannons, bells, and men. They desecrate what is most holy with no consequence. I think their God does have a power that is comparable to our anitos."

Simoyin replied, "But what of all the people that fled to the mountains for our healings? Is their God not strong enough to heal the infirm?"

"Does it matter?" Lawahin asked. "You have seen how merciless the Spanish have been. Why would their God be any better than they? Their God can choose not to heal us, but that doesn't change how powerful he is. I fear we must respect him."

Simoyin thought for a bit longer. "Do we need to start performing ceremonies for this God? Should we try to commune with him through the ancient ways?"

Lawahin paused and thought for a bit. "I always assumed that the churches and the masses were how to please this God. Could this God want more from us with all that we know?"

The two of them had spent their lives appeasing various spirits and anitos. They had both visited the invisible world and knew what the powerful beings of that world expected from them. Would God require the same things from them? It felt as though they were encountering something much stronger than their anitos and their unseen world. Perhaps, in order to survive both the Spanish and their God, they would have to submit.

Simoyin spoke again, "Here I thought we were doing all of these things to appease the Spanish. Perhaps we are doing it to appease their wrathful God. Maybe doing these things will keep this God's anger at bay."

Lawahin sighed. "This God has preserved and empowered these foreigners to take our lands and food. He must be a God of war, a God of vengeance. If this God has the power to protect these evil men and force our anitos and spirits to bow before him, what chance do we have at overpowering him?"

The two of them came to the same realization almost immediately - while they would not forsake their anitos entirely, they had to make sure they were doing what they could to keep the Spanish God appeased.

"I fear we must pray to him so that he will spare our lives," Simoyin thought aloud.

"Do we have to serve the Church, as well?" Lawahin asked. "Serve these priests?"

Simoyin thought back to Cruz's obsession over their gender and anatomy. What would serving these priests entail? Would the two of them be forced to sacrifice their bodies to the priests and their carnal desires? Simoyin continued thinking down this path until they concluded that the priests already control their bodies. They are forcing Simoyin to become a man at the threat of death.

"Let's keep this performative," Simoyin told Lawahin. "We continue to go to mass, we attend the church when asked,

we pray when told. But within the walls of our own home, we will worship the anitos. Surely the anitos have power in our home, and surely they can at least protect our home from God."

Chapter 7

Binyag

*Why does that God have to take my iniquity more into account
than the cries of so many innocents?*

Holy Week arrived with little warning, and the priests had the townspeople celebrate throughout the week, with the grandest celebrations being on Good Friday. The priests taught the people to reenact the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and parade the few images of Christ and the saints that they had around the town. The pomp and circumstance of the events confused many of the Tagalogs. In celebrating the anniversary of the deaths of loved ones, they gave food offerings to the deceased and honored their lives. The more devout Tagalogs would shave their heads and fast for days or weeks. The Catholics seemed to emphasize the events of the death of Christ above all else and did so with celebrations and parades. The Tagalogs could not

fully grasp what the Catholics were doing. Why focus so intently on his death?

On Easter Sunday, Simoyin approached the church on the day of their baptism. Walking from their home dressed in the garb of a man was a humiliating ordeal for the bayugin, but this was a matter of survival, not of living. As directed by Father Cruz, they stood outside and waited for the masses of townsfolk to come and witness the baptism. These baptisms were always very public events - the priests would try anything to get the people to accept baptism and submit to their authority. The more popular the person being baptized was, the more pompous the ceremony would be.

Father Cruz exited the church as the bells rang, signaling the townspeople to gather around the church. Though a voluntary event, hundreds of people came to watch the baptism, much to the delight of Father Cruz. They wanted to see what the Spanish would do to Simoyin. Cruz was convinced that Simoyin's baptism, the baptism of a spiritual leader to the people, would motivate several of the townspeople to also get baptized and submit to him.

Simoyin was visibly shaking. Not only were they dressed in men's clothes for the first time, but they were also being

presented as a man publicly in front of the whole town. Lawahin approached Simoyin and held their hand. She leaned over and whispered in their ear, "You are choosing life for the town. The choice you made is life for all. You are doing the right thing under these awful circumstances."

At the mention of life, Simoyin looked at all the townspeople gathered around the church, discreetly whispering to one another about Simoyin's change of clothes and their impending baptism. Simoyin could see various people whom they had helped, both in their home village and at San Tadeo. Simoyin chose to appease the priests, appease their God, and allow themselves to stay alive to serve the people of the community.

Cruz approached Simoyin and shooed Lawahin away with his eyes. He stood by Simoyin's side and began to preach:

"My children, thank you for coming to witness this magnificent event. Simoyin, once one of the most dedicated servants of the devil, has chosen..." He paused to make eye contact with Simoyin with the word 'chosen.' "...has chosen to accept God Almighty and to forsake his anitos and demons."

Cruz beckoned Simoyin to speak. Their heart was racing as they thought of what they were forced to say. Finally, they

opened their mouth: "The anito of the foreigners - God and Jesus - are stronger than all of the anitos we know." This statement felt so forced from their throat, but they knew they had to say something to appease God, to appease Cruz, to appease whatever threatened them and the townspeople.

This made Cruz smile. From his robes, Cruz drew a knife. He turned to the crowd and proclaimed, "With this knife, Simoyin will cut his hair - his hair that he used to braid while honoring the devil in his despicable rituals. And with his hair removed, the demons of his old practice will release him from their clutches."

Cruz handed the knife to Simoyin. They closed their eyes and let out a long sigh. They put the knife to their hair, drew a deep breath, and began cutting.

Amid this public humiliation, Cruz shouted, "With the cutting of his hair, Simoyin is cutting the devil out of his life. He is like the Magdalene whom Jesus cast seven demons out of! He is freeing himself from the clutches of death and hell!"

Simoyin, struggling to cut the hair they had used to help commune with the unseen world of spirits, felt a pit in their stomach grow larger at the words of Cruz. Death and hell? Simoyin was being threatened with death and very literal hellfire

to undergo such a humiliating display of admission! Perhaps if Simoyin had given into the lustful desires of Cruz, things would have been different.

The haircut lasted a minute or so, long enough to make it impossible for Simoyin to hold back tears. The longer they spent cutting their hair, the more tears streamed down their face. When it all finally ended, Simoyin successfully cut their hair to the length of a male Spaniard's hair. Simoyin felt naked without the hair that they had had for most of their life. Compared to everything the Spanish had made them do, it was a small sacrifice, but it still hurt them as much as all the other horrible things the Spanish forced upon them. Simoyin was now officially stripped of their public identity and would be forced to waltz around in the borrowed clothes and identity of a foreign man.

Cruz opened the doors of the church and said, "Enter, children, for we will baptize this beloved man of God."

The baptism proceeded with as much fanfare as Cruz could afford to give to the Tagalogs in his town with the little resources he had. Simoyin was given the Christian name Magdaleno, to whom Cruz referred to them from now on. The name was a constant reminder to Simoyin how Cruz truly felt

about them – a whore freed from the threat of the devils that captivated them.

A few others were baptized the same day, including Lawahin, who was given the name Josefina.

The baptism of such influential figures that day sent ripples throughout the community. Many before this Easter Sunday refused to be baptized, even though they were forced to abandon their native religion. Once they witnessed these two powerful healers accept baptism and publicly forsake everything they had known and loved, the unbaptized no longer had any excuse. They knew Simoyin was stubborn in their spirituality, and seeing them go through something so humiliating made the people understand that there was something important behind this conversion. The few hundred villagers who followed Father Arzaga down the mountain to San Tadeo, within a month, were all baptized.

Some were baptized out of fear - it was obvious Simoyin's life was in danger. They saw the tears run down their face during their hair-cutting performance. Simoyin was publicly threatened multiple times by the priests and physically assaulted in the mountains on the day they were forced from their village. The priests made it known that they would publicly flog anyone

who continued to practice the religion of the anitos. Truly, no Tagalog was safe under the rule of the Spanish.

Yet, some genuinely believed Simoyin's performance. They heard Simoyin offer to get themselves killed in the mountains to resist following the Spanish down to the lowlands. Seeing such a drastic change, though performative, was enough to convince some people that perhaps God was stronger than the indigenous anitos. Though the entire act of conversion was violently forced upon Simoyin, some people believed the act was sincere.

Regardless of the reasons for baptisms, Cruz was more than satisfied with the number of new Catholics that joined his flock. He wrote a letter to the king's court elaborating on the extraordinary act Arzaga did of bringing this 'heathen' down from the mountains to be baptized. Cruz also wrote how Simoyin 'willingly' chose baptism and humbly gave up their anitos.

Lawahin and Simoyin were publicly married by the priest later on to ensure the two would not be living together in adultery, a crime the Spanish somehow saw as less devastating than 'sodomy.' In an act of self-preservation, the two played the priests' games. The two were allowed to live together and

support each other, despite their pasts of working together as shamans. This, in itself, was truly a miracle.

Chapter 8

Magasawa

Do you think that the Philippines will be preserved by the friars?

The years passed on, and Simoyin grew closer to death. Even after the baptism, the marriage, and the catechisms, Juan still went and visited Simoyin nearly every day. The two had many differences, but they were similar in profound and meaningful ways. Both were spiritual, both valued their respective religions, and, perhaps most clearly, both were not exactly masculine.

At the age of twelve, Juan visited Simoyin. Little did Juan know that it would be one of their last visits together. He entered their home to see Simoyin lying on their mat being tended to by Lawahin. He witnessed Lawahin applying various oils to Simoyin's extremities.

"Are you sure you should be doing that?" he asked Lawahin.

"We are not summoning the spirits or the anitos," she responded with an annoyed tone. "We are simply applying medicines. There is no sin here."

Lawahin and Simoyin were used to Juan constantly checking on them to ensure that they were not falling back into their animistic ways. Father Cruz taught Juan and the other boys in town to keep an eye on the elderly, whom he thought were the most prone to fall back to the old religion. Lawahin was particularly agitated by Juan's faithfulness to this rule, but Simoyin reminded her that he did not know any better. Simoyin had built a special connection to the boy, and they did not want Lawahin scaring him off with her abrasive feelings on religion.

"How are you feeling today, Simoyin?" Juan asked. "Are you doing any better?"

"Oh, I am still alive," they responded. "I can't ask for more at this point."

Juan continued to watch Lawahin apply the oils to Simoyin. He thought of the holy water Christians were expected to touch themselves with, the ash the priests applied to their foreheads at the start of Lent, and the ointments used during certain sacraments. It was as though Lawahin was giving Simoyin their last rites.

Lost in thought about the sacraments, Juan blurted out, "Why did you two get married?"

The two were initially stunned by the question and remained silent. After a moment or so, Lawahin finally giggled. Simoyin responded with, "What makes you ask that question? That's really bold of you!"

"My sister is courting a man now," he said, "and it looks like they will get married soon. It makes me think of the future. Love. Marriage. Children. Then I thought of you two, and your marriage seems very different."

"You are very observant, Juan," Simoyin responded. "And you are right - our marriage is different. But we do love each other. But this love is... different. And, since we chose to live together, we were expected to get married."

"Oh! To follow the sixth commandment!" Juan said excitedly.

"Yeah, that works," Lawahin quietly responded.

Juan looked at her in confusion.

"Juan," Simoyin began, "Lawahin and I have many things in common. We spent much of our lives together in the mountains. We wanted to stay together when we moved down here, and the only way to do so was to get married."

"Oh, just tell him the full story!" Lawahin said. "He's old enough to know!" Lawahin paused and quietly continued, "And we don't know how much time we have left..."

Juan turned towards Simoyin with a puzzled look on his face. He felt that Simoyin's answer was sufficient, but Lawahin opened a Pandora's box of questions. What was the full story?

Lawahin elaborated, "The Spanish threatened to kill Simoyin multiple times. We didn't really have a choice to come down here or to get baptized."

Juan thought back to years ago when Father Cruz asked to see Simoyin's body.

"But you didn't have to get married," he said.

"It was for Simoyin's safety," Lawahin said. "The Spanish were looking for ways to kill Simoyin, and getting married would have protected them."

"Why would they kill them after they were baptized?" Juan asked.

This time, Simoyin spoke: "They call it the crime against nature. When two people, other than a man and a woman, love each other. The penalty for that is burning at the stake."

Simoyin intended to be blunt, yet to keep it simple for Juan, but they did not realize that their phrasing opened a new world for the boy.

"Like men loving other men?" Juan asked, his face slightly blushing. "The crime of nature was never about love. It is the temptations of the devil!"

"It is much more complicated than that, Juan," Simoyin corrected him. "Love, romantic love, can happen beyond a man and a woman."

"Like a binabae... or bayugin loving another man," Lawahin stated, trying to keep things simple for Juan.

"Surely you've been taught this in catechisms and confessions," Simoyin said. "They ask questions about this every time in confession."

"They thought you would do that? Marry another man?" Juan asked.

"Juan," Simoyin replied, "of course they did. It is not a new practice among the Tagalogs. I have married another man before."

"What?" Juan leaned back in shock. "How? Where? Why?"

"When I was younger," Simoyin responded. "I had a husband for twenty years in the mountains. He died before we moved down here. It has always been a possibility that I would marry another man. Marrying Lawahin took away that possibility and saved my life."

Juan stood in shock. Should he tell Cruz or Arzaga? How was this even possible? But Simoyin was so old. Was getting the priests involved a good idea?

"Juan," Simoyin said, "I don't have much time left in this world. It's time you know the parts of my life I have not told you."

Juan panicked. "I need to go. I'm sorry!"

Without saying another word, he left their house and frantically ran back to his home.

* * *

A few days later, Juan returned to Simoyin's house. Simoyin was still lying on the floor, but it was clear their health was getting worse.

"Simoyin?" Juan said as he rushed towards her. "Are you okay?"

"I am fine," they responded. "Juan, I didn't mean to scare you the other day. I'm just so close to death, and I want you to know my story before I leave this realm."

Reality took hold of Juan's thoughts. Simoyin was dying, and they would not be here for much longer.

"Juan," Simoyin started, "are you okay?"

Juan let out a long breath and thought for a minute.

"Last time I was here, you told me there were parts to your life that I needed to know." He hesitated. "I want to know them now before you... leave." Tears began to well up in his eyes. "I don't care what it is. I think I just need to know who you are."

Simoyin smiled. "Thank you for coming to see me today, Juan. This truly means so much to me during this depressing time."

Beginning at their birth in the mountains, Simoyin explained their childhood and teenage years. Juan learned that Simoyin realized they were a binabae as a child. In their teen years, they had a dream where they were chosen to be a bayugin - a binabae priest. They began learning from their mother, who was a priestess, about being a bayugin. Other priestesses in the village assisted in their tutelage.

As a young adult, Simoyin found a man, a prosperous trader from a neighboring village. The two were married. They lived together for twenty years until he was killed on a journey to Manila months after the Spanish took control. Simoyin spoke of

Lawahin and how they remember her birth and how they assisted with it. To Juan's horror, they talked frankly about their relocation to San Tadeo, the abuse they faced, the threats they received, their baptism, and their current illness.

Juan was speechless. What do you say to a dying friend who tells you their life story? And how do you respond to the fact that the life in question was nearly opposite to the rules of the Church and the priests? A life that would surely send the person who was living that way to hell.

"Juan," Simoyin said, "I believe someday you will need to learn from my life to save your life and the lives of others."

How could Juan use this information to save the life of another? This bayugin was a servant of the devil. Any person that they saved was saved by the devil, against the will of God! But Juan had pity. He had known Simoyin for a number of years now and had grown to love them, despite their contrasting differences.

"How will I use this to save myself or another?" he asked. "I am a Christian."

"You will know when the time comes," Simoyin responded. "Life works mysteriously. You need to be patient and observant."

Juan stared at the floor, processing everything he had just heard.

"Juan," Simoyin said, "the Spanish are not always right. There is joy and power in finding someone you truly love. Do not hold yourself back because a priest of a foreign land told you to. Remember where you come from. Your heritage, your lands, your very nature is more important than anything from Spain."

These words confused Juan further. But, for some unknown reason, they brought him peace and a hint of hope. Maybe he was more than just a sinner. Was it possible that Juan was not inherently evil? Perhaps there was more to his life than being a poor Tagalog boy under the constant threat of hell and damnation.

Not long after this visit, Simoyin passed. A simple funeral mass was performed in their honor, and they were buried near the church. Juan could not explain it, but Simoyin's death left a gaping hole in his life that he could not fill. He felt as though they should have lived longer to help guide him through his adult years. Simoyin's life story remained with him in the back of his head through his teen years. Was there more to life than the Church? Could there be meaning behind his fondness for his male peers? Were all of these suppressed temptations greater

than what the confession manuals and vicious sermons relegated them to be? Unfortunately, after dwelling on such things, Juan quickly forced those questions to the back of his mind again. Those ideas were damning. Juan could not risk going to hell, or worse, incurring the wrath and fury of God.

Chapter 9

Palayan

Be content and speak in your own language and don't spoil

Spanish – it is not for the likes of you.

Despite Simoyin's death, and notwithstanding Juan's need for more time with Simoyin, time kept crawling forward. The years passed by, and Juan grew into a man. He soon inherited the debts of his parents and the job of his father, working the fields claimed by the Church. Twice a year, he would plow and flood the fields and tend to the rice. He did this all under the guidance of Father Arzaga, as Father Cruz passed away shortly after Simoyin's death.

Juan's parents began to age, as did his siblings. One of his sisters, Sara, eventually started courting a Tagalog man named Noe. The two were married in a simple Catholic ceremony. Shortly thereafter, she found herself pregnant with her first child. Juan's mother, Marta, no longer burdened with

young children, began devoting herself more to the church and the local confraternity. Marta volunteered her time maintaining the church and tending to various altars of the Virgin Mary throughout the town and along various trails that led outside of San Tadeo. The confraternity offered Marta and several other women opportunities to serve the Church for free and to help secure their own salvation, per the promise given by Cruz.

San Tadeo sat next to a river that flowed out from the mountains and emptied into the lowlands near Manila. Various streams crisscrossed around the town that flowed into the river. The priests taught the people how to use these streams to flood the rice paddies, a technique that they adapted from the lakeside Tagalogs on the other side of the mountains.

Every day after laboring in the field, Juan would make his way over to a nearby stream and bathe. The unforgiving sun took a toll on Juan, and bathing was the only way to clean off the sweat and cool down his body. He was frequently joined by other farmers in the town who also sought relief from a long day's work. It was an ageless custom that not even the Spanish could stop them from following.

Juan soon reached his twentieth year. The debt, the farm, his family, and the Church all forced him to mature quickly.

Of course, there was pressure for Juan to marry, an expensive endeavor since he would be required to pay a bride price to the father of the bride. Noe paid a bride price to his father when Sara was married, which was a great sacrifice for Noe and his family. The bride price barely kept Juan's family financially stable for a few short months.

Despite this, Juan avoided the pestering of his family, neighbors, and the priest to get married. Juan knew very well that he was not romantically attracted to women, though he got along with several of them. He felt he was too young for marriage, which he would have been in future centuries, but the Tagalogs expected their children to marry young, and Juan only had so much youth left.

One day, after toiling in the fields, Juan went to the stream where he regularly bathed. He arrived before anyone else and took advantage of the silence to cool down and rest peacefully. After a challenging day of work, Juan appreciated the solitude he found at the stream. He just needed his space.

His peaceful moment was interrupted with both terror and joy as another Tagalog man approached the stream and entered. It was Rolando Kulog, the son of one of the former datus who resettled from the mountains to San Tadeo. Juan

began ever so subtly to shake out of sheer panic and excitement as he made room in the stream for Rolando.

"Hey, Rolando," Juan mustered out as Rolando sat down in the stream. Juan's heart began pounding harder. Rolando was an attractive man with significant influence in the town. His father was granted an administrative role by the Spanish, which kept his family well off. Rolando was also in his early twenties and, like Juan, was single. Unlike Juan, however, Rolando had never worked a day in the Church's paddies. That labor was all relegated to families indebted to others.

"Juan," Rolando replied, "how have you been? It's been a while. I feel like I never see you anymore."

The two sat in awkward silence for what seemed like an eternity. Juan was terrified that he would say the wrong thing or embarrass himself in front of one of the most powerful Tagalogs in the village.

Rolando finally broke the silence, which only lasted thirty seconds or so. "You're taking over the Church's fields your dad used to work?" Rolando asked.

"I am," Juan said with a bit of confidence.

"That must be exhausting," Rolando wondered. "I could never do that kind of labor!"

"You get used to it," Juan said. "It's really not that difficult. Just time-consuming."

"Do you get to use the Church's carabao to plow?" Rolando asked.

"Yeah," Juan said. "The Church was merciful and patient while teaching me how to plow with it. Those animals are stubborn!" The Church indeed taught the Tagalogs to plow with the water buffalo, as Tagalogs did not use the carabao for plowing before the arrival of the Spanish.

"I think the carabao you use is the one my father gave to the Church," Rolando responded. "What a funny coincidence! At least I know you'll use it right. I'll let my father know."

Another pause occurred, making Juan dread his situation. Juan's heart began pounding harder and harder, and each beat felt deafening to his ears. He finally spoke up, "Are you still learning Spanish and Latin?"

"Yeah," Rolando sighed. "Father Arzaga says it will help me with future work and serving in the Church. He still uses me to check up on his parishioners." This meant that Arzaga was using Rolando to spy on the villagers to see if they were slipping back to their animist roots or falling into whatever sins Arzaga deemed as dangerous.

"What I would give to work with the Church like you do," Juan exclaimed. "I wish I could join the men's confraternity like you've been able to. You're so blessed!" Despite Juan's humble position, he devoted himself to the Church almost as much as his mother. He admired Rolando for his perceived spirituality and devotion to the Church.

"Spanish and Latin are hard," Rolando replied. "They are nothing like Tagalog or Kapampangan."

"You know Kapampangan?" Juan asked.

"No, no," Rolando stated. "But my father used to work with traders who would speak it in Pampanga."

Juan gathered what little courage he had and said, "You're a good fit for the Church, and I'm glad that the fathers chose you. There are some interesting people in this town, but it's good to see them choose someone so competent!"

Rolando chuckled the praises away. "I'm not that amazing, but I'll take the compliment."

The two continued to chat about the Church for a short time, continuing as others entered the stream to bathe. Several minutes passed, and Rolando was finally prepared to leave to return home.

"This was fun," Rolando said. He then put his hand on Juan's shoulder and said, "Juan, you should stop by my place sometime. We should drink together. I've really enjoyed my time with you and want to be with you more."

Juan's heart dropped. This was a grand honor! Drinking together was reserved for close friends. Juan was confused why Rolando offered something so important so casually. And Rolando wanted to be with Juan more? His deepest desire to find a connection with another man who wanted to be with him, as well, was appearing before him. And a man of the Church, no less!

Juan did not realize that Rolando was simply looking for praise and surrounded himself with people who gave him endless compliments. Rolando was rather selfish and found uses for people in one way or another.

"Yeah! Definitely!" Juan responded excitedly. "For sure! I'll come over sometime soon!" Rolando said his goodbyes and walked towards his home in the town center.

Juan finished bathing and headed back home, almost skipping from the amazing experience he just had. After eating dinner, Juan sat outside of his family's small home to take in the view of the town and rice paddies against the setting sun. Their

home was on the outskirts of the town next to the paddies that Juan worked. This allowed Juan to look over his work and get a stunning view of the town center that lay in the distance.

He saw a man appear from the town who was walking towards the direction of their house. It was another Tagalog man in his twenties. As the man approached, Juan realized it was Gabriel Tagulan, a man whom he had known throughout his childhood.

"Gabriel," Juan said, "What brings you out here on the other side of town?"

"Oh," he said, pointing to a satchel that he was wearing, "I'm being sent to drop off crops to Maria Sila." Sila lived further past Juan's family's home towards the outskirts of the rice paddies.

Gabriel was like Juan - single, in his twenties, and a farmer of land that was not his. Both came from poor families, and both had inherited debts from their parents. Having so much in common allowed them to get along, but they were not necessarily friends.

"How are the fields doing?" Gabriel asked, looking over the paddies glistening in the reflected sunset.

"This year has been good to us," Juan replied, "Thanks be to God."

"Thanks be to God," Gabriel said emotionlessly and somewhat forced. "We've seen very few problems this year, too." Gabriel cleared his throat and changed his tone. "I hear your sister is pregnant?"

"Yeah," Juan responded. "She's getting close to delivery."

"Will this be your first niece or nephew?" Gabriel asked.

"Yeah, my mom's first grandchild," Juan replied. "This is a big event for our family. My mom is so excited and so worried at the same time. She's acting like she hasn't given birth multiple times before."

"Well, we can't hardly imagine what your mother experienced," Gabriel stated. "And she knows that her daughter will experience it soon. That must be an awful feeling for a mother. Men really have no idea what childbirth is like, so honestly, only our moms can fully empathize with our sisters." Gabriel stopped himself from going off on a tangent. "Anyways, that's good for your family. I would love to be an uncle."

Gabriel caught his breath for a minute before continuing. "I'm the oldest, and here I am, not married. None of my siblings are." He paused. "I really don't feel ready for marriage, honestly."

"Really?" Juan said with surprise. "I thought I was the only one!"

"Not at all, Juan," Gabriel replied. "The bride price, the responsibilities, the obligations, the children. It's a lot. I just don't feel ready for any of that. And, if I'm being honest, my sisters are enough. Imagining marrying a woman! The emotional labor and forced love!"

Gabriel's comment about marrying a woman went right over Juan's head. Gabriel, like Juan, got along with plenty of women, but he did not want to marry one. "I wouldn't mind having kids," Juan said. "But having to take care of another woman, I don't know if I can do that. Women are so graceful, and men are so... lost."

Gabriel laughed and patted Juan on the back. "Either way, Juan, you are not alone. Marriage is a big step for many of us. I don't think any man is really ready for marriage."

Gabriel pulled out a yam from his satchel. "Here, Juan, take this. Please give it to your mother. I know she likes my mom's yams."

"What?" Juan responded.

"Your mother can have this," Gabriel repeated.

"No, I can't," Juan stated.

"Please, Juan, take it," Gabriel insisted. "We have more than enough." He grabbed Juan's hand and placed the yam inside his palm.

Juan shyly took it. "Thank you, Gabriel. That's very nice of you."

"And don't worry - there is no debt of gratitude," Gabriel reassured. "Besides, I don't have the time to chase you down to get you to repay my debts." Gabriel chuckled to himself and then looked out into the distance. "I best be on my way before the sun fully sets."

Gabriel began walking towards Sila's house at the edge of the paddies. Juan examined the yam gifted to him. "That was really nice of him," he thought, wishing he could think of some way to return the favor. Then Juan's thoughts turned to Rolando. The thoughts of Gabriel and the yam melted away with sheer excitement and dread. Rolando and Juan were to be drinking buddies, and it was Rolando who offered. "He actually wants to be around me!" he thought. "He literally said it!"

Chapter 10

Hilot

God has delivered me from greater perils!

The timing of Rolando's invitation came at an incredibly awkward moment for Juan. Juan's sister, Sara, was pregnant with her first child, and her delivery date was to come any day now. Unfortunately for Sara, Father Arzaga was very skeptical of the traditional midwives in the town, so he personally attended births and encouraged delivering mothers to pray to Saint Ignatius and limited most midwife intervention. It was rumored that the saint, before canonization, helped women during childbirth in Manila and other nearby towns. Arzaga had picked up on this myth during his multiple visits to the cathedral in Manila.

Juan visited Sara every day, knowing that she needed the attention in case anything bad happened in her state. He went to her home early the morning after receiving Rolando's

invitation to check on her. She was still very pregnant, yet her husband, Noe, was out working the fields of the people his parents were indebted to. He had no choice – both families were already so poor and buried in so much debt.

"I don't know how much longer I can take this," Sara complained to Juan, rubbing her lower back and neck. "I wish I could just get this baby out of me now!"

Juan, thoroughly committed to the Church, responded with, "God will be with you. Mom and I have been praying to Saint Ignatius for a safe delivery."

Sara held back her true feelings. She was less committed to the Church than Juan and Marta were, but she knew making a scene would only cause problems. In her state of agony, she wanted to tell Juan off, but she decided it was better not to.

"Did you and Noe decide on any Christian names last night?" Juan asked.

"Oh, not at all," Sara responded. "I fell asleep before Noe finished his work yesterday. He only woke me up to feed me."

Sara continued, "I'll let the priest come up with a Christian name for the baby since we really don't have a choice."

We will stay traditional and name the baby once it's born. We're going to have a Tagalog baby, so why burden it with just a Spanish name?" The Tagalogs had a tradition of naming their children after natural events that occurred around the time of childbirth. However, some of the townspeople were beginning to give their children Christian names at birth since the Church required children and persons being baptized to take on a Christian name.

"What's Mom working on now to prepare for the baby?" Sara asked.

"I can't keep track," Juan replied. "I think she finished the skirt she was making for you last night, but this morning, it looked like she was working on other clothes. Maybe a blanket for the baby? I don't know what she's doing half the time. She can't stop making things. She's so excited to have a grandkid. And she's so worried..."

"Well, it's not like you would help her get a grandkid," Sara jokingly said.

The comment stung Juan, but he let a lot of things slide with his sister these days. He pitied seeing her so far along in pregnancy and struggling through all of its difficulties. Sara spent much of her time alone due to Noe being unable to be at home

all the time. Juan wished he could spend his days with Sara and care for her during the pregnancy, but he was in an almost identical situation to Noe's. One of the few ways he could actually help her was just to let her hurtful comments go without focusing on them.

"I'll get married at the right time," Juan reassured her, knowing very well that the right time would never come. "I'm already reminded by the whole town daily. It will happen when it happens."

"My ankles feel like they are on fire," Sara complained, tuning out whatever Juan just said. She handed Juan a couple of pieces of gold. "Can you go to Lawahin and get something for the pain? Something for my ankles and my back. But not the stuff you got me last time. That didn't help at all. I need something stronger."

Juan hesitated as he always did in dealing with Lawahin and her medicines, but he trusted her, despite her lackluster conversion to Christianity. He took the pieces of gold and left Sara's house.

He made his way to Lawahin's house, who was now technically a widow, but still was relatively youthful. Despite Father Arzaga's abhorrence of traditional medicine, Lawahin still

collected herbs and oils to make medicines for the townspeople. Several of the people began to notice that praying to different saints, or to the Virgin herself, was not enough to keep everyone alive. Juan, however, did not know if she still performed the old ceremonies in private. Somehow, that information was kept from him.

Though in bad favor with Arzaga, Lawahin successfully convinced Juan that the medicines were innocent because she no longer performed ceremonies to the anitos. This statement, from Juan's observations, was true. Lawahin did apply herbs, oils, and medicines without chanting a word of ancient prayers or donning priestly attire. Juan felt that these practices were, at their worst, harmless. This mindset along with his views on marriage were the only things Juan dared to disagree with Arzaga on.

Juan greeted Lawahin. "Do you have anything to help with pain? My sister is struggling. And she's asking for something stronger than whatever you gave me last time."

Lawahin brought Juan into her house, the same home that housed Simoyin years earlier. She began going through her collection of oils and herbs and picked out a few for Juan. "The

soreness and pain only get worse the closer you get to childbirth," she said.

"Yeah," Juan answered, "I don't think she could get any bigger. She has to be close."

"You'd be surprised," Lawahin responded. "I've seen a few women pregnant with twins, and they do get bigger. The damage twins do to the body - it's horrible!"

Juan pondered for a moment. "I never thought of that before."

"And what are the plans for her birth?" Lawahin asked.

"Arzaga will be there and assist," Juan replied.

"That's a terrible idea," Lawahin responded. "Do you want her to die?"

"It's what my mom wants."

"Is it what Sara wants?" she asked.

Juan paused for a second to think. "I don't think so. I think she trusts the traditional ways more."

"Well, she's right," Lawahin said. "How many expectant mothers have died in childbirth in the past few years?"

"Too many," Juan answered pensively. He quietly thought to himself that surely God had a purpose for all of these deaths, but he knew better than to correct Lawahin.

"Too many, indeed. Died praying to the saints and the Virgin." Lawahin said, continuing to rummage through her medicines looking for something to help with the pain. "Where is Sara feeling the pain today?"

"Her ankles and back, and probably her neck, too," Juan replied. "She looks like she's in more pain than she has been before."

Lawahin gave the oils to Juan, who, in turn, gave her the gold.

"I'm assuming Arzaga is also expecting to be at the childbirth?" she asked.

"Yes," Juan said, "he's already making preparations. You know how energized he gets during these last days of pregnancy."

"Yeah, because he gets to see a woman's body," Lawahin snarkily replied. "It's not like any of you actually have a choice in the matter. Dozens of these foreign men come into our country, take away our traditions and healings, and tell us women how to give birth. And these men are supposedly celibate? Yet they're always present during the childbirth. During confessions with the younger women, they take them into more

private areas. Does that kind of behavior encourage celibacy? It just doesn't make any sense!"

Juan chose to stay quiet to avoid starting an argument. Today clearly was not the day to share any of his true feelings.

Lawahin sighed. "Sometimes I feel like the fathers are slowly trying to kill us all."

Juan had mixed feelings about Lawahin's comment. He could never admit it to himself, but he knew Arzaga did not have the best intentions. Juan had seen Arzaga repeatedly abuse his power to control others, and he had seen Arzaga harm people several times in the name of God. He even recalled Simoyin's life story where Arzaga abused both Lawahin and Simoyin during their removal from the mountain village. Despite all of this, Arzaga was a consecrated man of God and had to be trusted. God could work through Arzaga to help the community. Through some strange reason, however, God was allowing so many women and children to die in childbirth. It was one of the mysteries of God, Juan supposed, that he was not meant to understand. It must have been some form of a trial of faith, or a sign of the faithlessness of those who perished.

"Before I was forced to move down here," Lawahin continued, "I was a priestess, yes, but I also occasionally helped

with childbirth. It was not my expertise, but I'm confident I have more experience than Arzaga could ever have with his stubbornness over how childbirths should be performed."

Lawahin let out a long and sad sigh. Juan then decided to ask, "Do you want to come to Sara's with me now and check on her?"

Lawahin scoffed. "And what would Arzaga think when he sees Josefina, the witch of the town, going and checking up on a pregnant woman? It's better for me to stay here and just make my medicines for others."

"That's a shame," Juan responded. "Sara would probably like a visit from you."

"Should anything happen to Sara, you come to me immediately," Lawahin commanded. "If Arzaga can't make it, let me know, too. Having priests direct childbearing is dangerously stupid, and any change to Arzaga's methods of delivery could save your sister."

Juan knew she was right. Though a mystery to him as to how it could happen, too many had passed away in childbirth for the trend to go unnoticed. Juan wanted to trust in God, Arzaga, and the saints, but he knew, realistically, he may need to call on Lawahin for help. In the end, his sister's life and the life of her

unborn child were more important than this miniature crisis of faith he was having over Arzaga.

"We never had this many people die in childbirth before the foreigners came," Lawahin stated. "We know what we are doing! They don't! It is beyond clear how bad a job they are doing at childbirth!"

Chapter 11

Manananggal

You will say that no matter how imperfect is our religion today, it is preferable to what we previously had.

A few days later, after finishing his bathing at the stream at the end of his work that day, Juan stopped by Sara's house to see how she was faring with the pregnancy. To his horror, he found Sara on the floor, seething in pain. Her immediate surroundings and the lower portion of her clothing were wet. Her water had broken, and she had gone into labor.

"DON'T JUST STARE AT ME!" she screamed at him.
"GET MOM NOW!"

Without a second thought, Juan rushed out of her house and headed straight to his home. Running the whole way, it still took him a few minutes to get to his house. Out of breath, he summoned his mom, who frantically began collecting things in the house before running towards Sara's house. Juan was about

to follow her, but he remembered Lawahin's command to get her should anything happen. The sun was setting, and he did not know how much help Sara would need. Juan had no experience with childbirth whatsoever, and the image of his sister in agony lying wet on the floor of her house scarred his mind. He could not risk Sara's health nor jeopardize her life, even if it meant that he would upset Arzaga. Making a quick decision, he headed towards the home of Lawahin.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Lawahin exclaimed when Juan arrived. "Arzaga is out of town! The sun is setting, and there's no way he would travel at night. This is perfect! He won't be here to ruin the childbirth! Sara might just live through this!"

Juan did not know Arzaga had left town. Arzaga travelled periodically to the cathedral in Manila or to check on other small towns throughout the area that did not have a permanent priest to watch over them. It was interesting to Juan that Arzaga left so close to Sara's delivery. Arzaga wanted to be present at every child delivery to ensure no 'witchcraft' took place, with 'witchcraft' in his eyes being just about anything of indigenous origins.

"How long will Father Arzaga be gone?" he asked.

"I don't know," Lawahin answered, "He left this morning."
That meant that he would be gone for at least the night.

Just like Marta did earlier, Lawahin collected an assortment of random items in a frantic hurry. Once done, the two of them rushed to Sara's house and found her being positioned by her mother. By this time, Sara's husband, Noe, was home.

"Noe," Lawahin ordered, "go fetch your friends! Men! We need men!"

Lawahin looked at Sara and Marta. "We need to get her to another house."

"I can't move!" Sara panicked. "I can't even walk! I'm delivering the baby here!"

"I know you can't move!" Lawahin shouted back, "That's why Noe is getting his friends!" Lawahin was overwhelmed and agitated by the severity of the situation. "We can't risk you delivering here. You may lose the baby!"

Juan was both panicking and confused. "Why can't she just deliver here? That's what she wants."

"Manananggal!" Lawahin retorted.

It all became clear for Juan. The manananggal was a creature that took on the form of a human during the day. At

night, it would split at the waist, abandoning its lower half in the brush. Its upper half grew wings, and the monster flew in search of pregnant women to eat their fetuses. It was known to be present at childbirths, and many of the old priestesses and midwives knew they could throw the manananggal off by delivering the child in a different house.

Lawahin was convinced there was a manananggal contributing to the deaths of so many mothers and newborns. The fact that delivering mothers were not following the customs to protect themselves against the manananggal suggested that they were more susceptible to the attacks from the monster. Arzaga was against the Tagalogs doing anything during a childbirth that did not involve praying to the saints or involved a woman remotely tainted by priestcraft, like Lawahin was. His stubbornness made it easy for Lawahin and other Tagalogs to place the blame for the deaths on the Church and the manananggal.

Marta was hesitant. "We can just pray to Saint..."

"You can pray to your saint later! We will move her!"

Lawahin ordered. "This will keep her alive! We can't let the manananggal find her!"

Noe returned with four of his friends, all close to his age and in good health.

"Pick Sara up," Lawahin commanded the men, "and take her to my house."

Noe and one of his friends picked Sara up and began carrying her to Lawahin's house. Everyone else followed. The move took several minutes and garnered a lot of attention from the neighbors. As the party moved Sara along the darkening roads of the night, neighbors poked their heads out or walked to the street to see what the commotion was all about. Childbirth had become somewhat of a death sentence in the town, and the neighbors watched the party with hopeless and worried expressions. Noe and his friends had to switch off carrying Sara to alleviate exhaustion. Juan, ever diligent, assisted in carrying his sister in during one of these switches, wanting to do anything in his power to keep his sister alive, even if it did not make sense to him.

When they arrived at the house, Lawahin rolled out a mat in the middle of the room and ordered Sara to be placed on it. Two of Noe's friends placed Sara onto the mat and got her into the most comfortable position they could think of. Noe tried

to assist after his wife was laid onto the mat, but Lawahin stopped him.

"All of the men need to go outside now and fend off the manananggal," Lawahin barked. "There's a bolo knife in the corner and several bamboo reeds outside. Use those to fight it off!"

One of Noe's friends grabbed the bolo knife and handed it to Noe. The six men, including Juan, scrambled outside. Juan, confused by the order, knew he had to follow directions and went with the men. He had no idea how he could help in the first place. He wanted to stay in the house with the women, but he was also afraid of Lawahin's current state of aggression. As Juan exited out of the house, he noted that the sun had already set, and the twilight was slowly dimming into darkness.

Turning his eyes away from the horizon, Juan looked towards Noe and his friends. His heart stopped, and his soul filled with terror as he watched Noe and his friends begin to undress completely. All articles of clothing were quickly removed, and the five men glanced over at Juan with expectant looks, waiting for him to follow suit. Juan had been so far removed from many of the superstitious traditions of the Tagalogs that he forgot that the phallus deterred the manananggal. In the days before

the Catholic priests intervened, while a woman was giving birth, the father and his friends would surround the house bearing weapons, strip down, and defend his home and family from the manananggal.

With all eyes on him, Juan begrudgingly and shyly began undressing. He was nervous being exposed in front of men, especially in such a masculine setting. His insecurities and inability to conform to the Spanish gender norms made him particularly self-conscious around other men. The nudity only compounded those feelings. At least while bathing, he could cover himself with his hands. He could not do that here, and he was expected to wield a bamboo reed to fight off the monster. Naked and performing masculine tasks – a humiliating situation for Juan to be in. And with other men!

Juan finished undressing and attempted to cover himself without making it obvious what he was doing. He knew same-sex relations were a sin, and this tradition, though lifesaving, seemed to blur the lines between charitable and profane. Juan was aware that nothing sexual would be happening during this battle with the manananggal. If anything, the event would be horrific. Still, he taught himself to avoid situations that may lead him into temptation – something he learned from Simoyin, of all people.

One of Noe's friends gathered the bamboo reeds and passed them out to the other men. Juan grabbed his reed, inhaled deeply, and let out a long sigh. "I can do this," he thought to himself. "I am a man. I work in the fields my father worked in. I can be a part of this defense group. I am a man. It's okay. This is for Sara. I've got to do this for Sara. God will understand." He turned his eyes heavenward after reasoning with himself. "Father, forgive me if what I am doing is a sin. I don't know what else to do."

Once the men were all armed, Noe began giving assignments to his friends and Juan. Noe and a friend went atop the roof, two of his friends went under the stilted house, and Juan and the last friend continuously circled the perimeter of the house from the ground. They had to ensure that a man properly guarded all parts of the house and that no holes existed where the manananggal could secretly attack from. According to the folklore, the manananggal had a long tongue that could penetrate human flesh and slip through holes and cracks in the bamboo housing. The men, positioning themselves all around the house and constantly moving, armed and exposed at the same time, greatly reduced the chances of the monster attacking Sara during this fateful hour.

The men began waving and stabbing into the air with their reeds and bolo. Juan, diligently circling the house on the ground, really did not know what to do or what he was doing, so he looked towards the other men and mimicked their actions. This was something Juan vaguely knew about but had absolutely no idea how to do. Juan did his best to repress any humiliation that he felt for not being manly enough or not knowing how to use a reed of bamboo as a weapon. Truthfully, Noe and his friends only knew how to fight the manananggal from the stories their fathers and uncles told them. They were just as practiced and awkward on the issue as Juan was.

From the inside of the house, they could hear Sara scream. Muffled commands from Lawahin could also be heard as she directed Marta to assist in the delivery. Juan, listening more carefully than the other men, heard Marta quietly praying with a shaking voice as she assisted Lawahin.

After continuing to mimic the movements of the men beside him, Juan began to feel more confident. The feelings of humiliation subsided the longer he performed this masculine duty. For the first time in his life, he felt man enough. There he was performing a manly task with his peers. He was in a vulnerable state, but it did not bother any of the men he was

with. None of them were correcting him, making fun of him, or criticizing him. They were all performing some ritual together with no idea of what they were doing. As Juan continued to watch the subtle confusion mixed with the helpless actions of his male peers, he realized he was not alone. He was, for once, normal.

More importantly, Juan was doing this to defend his sister. The entire tradition felt strangely empowering. "Was this what it was like to be a husband and a father?" he thought to himself. "Is it this unscripted? Are there really any solidified expectations to be a man? A husband? A father?"

Juan felt a liberating feeling behind this whole ritual. Not just physically liberating, but mentally and spiritually liberating. Juan had spent much of his life following the orders of Arzaga and Cruz. He avoided the face of sin wherever it reared its head. Now, he was participating in the 'forbidden' traditions of old with no fear of repercussions from Arzaga. It was as though he finally threw off the yoke of oppression Arzaga had placed on his shoulders.

And in all of this, it felt right. Here he was, completely vulnerable and lost with Noe and his friends. Juan was just another man who had no idea what he was supposed to be doing. Yet at the same time, it was as though he was

reconnecting with his roots. The whole ordeal felt so natural to him. He should have been in fear the whole time of a monster coming to attack his sister, but he was so focused on his newfound freedom and identity that the monster rarely crossed his mind.

“Is this who I am meant to be?” Juan asked himself.

An hour or so passed, the screaming subsided, and the men could hear a baby begin to cry from inside the house. Once satisfied that the women and the baby were safe, the men dressed themselves and entered the house.

Sara was on the mat, clearly exhausted. She was holding the newborn who had recently been cleaned. Marta was in the corner of the room with tears on her face, offering prayers of thanksgiving to the Virgin. Lawahin was by Sara's side, tending to the mother and baby.

"It's a girl," Lawahin told the men. "It's a healthy girl!" Lawahin was relieved and proud that both the mother and the daughter survived such a dangerous ordeal.

Noe went to his wife and daughter and sat beside them. He put his arm around Sara and cupped the head of his new daughter. Juan went to his mother's side and joined her in her prayers to the Virgin. Despite participating in the 'forbidden'

tradition of fending off the manananggal, he still deeply believed in the Catholic faith and felt as though God and the Virgin were watching over Sara. He gave thanks to the Virgin for helping him be a servant in the hands of God. Somewhat sheepishly, he also gave thanks for allowing the Virgin to show him some insight into manhood.

"Both Sara and the girl need to stay here tonight," Lawahin told her visitors. "And whatever any of you do, do NOT report this to Arzaga or any town leadership!"

Lawahin handed a bowl that appeared to be full of blood to Noe. "That is the placenta," she told him. "Go and bury it near your house. And don't forget where it's buried!"

Noe carefully took the bowl outside, ensuring not to spill any of its contents. He made a slow and delicate journey over to his house. Once he arrived at the perimeter of his home, he found a spot of land close to the house where he dug a shallow hole with his bare hands and placed the placenta in it. He carefully filled the hole and noted the surroundings of the buried organ. For all of Noe's and Sara's future children, he would be expected to bury their placentas in that exact location.

Chapter 12

Pandot

If you have seen what I have, miserable creatures, unfortunates suffering indescribable tortures for crimes they have not committed.

Sara and her baby survived the night at Lawahin's house and were able to return to their home the next morning. Given all of the childbirth complications San Tadeo had faced for the past several years, it was a miracle that both Sara and her daughter came out alive and well.

Juan did not know how to feel about keeping the information surrounding the childbirth from Father Arzaga, but he knew if he said anything, Lawahin would be publicly flogged. He did not want that to happen to her, especially after she saved his sister and his niece, so he chose to keep the event secret. Deep down, he was also concerned about what Arzaga would think of him, knowing that he assisted in the traditional birth that night.

Juan even dared to fetch Lawahin himself without even thinking about going to the priest first. How backwards were his priorities! All of the blame for witchcraft could be put squarely on the shoulders of Juan.

The secret pact the group made at Lawahin's house that night did not stop the whispers throughout town. Much of the town saw Sara being carried into Lawahin's house by multiple men. The screams of labor could not be muffled. Some townspeople surely also saw Juan, Noe, and the other men defend the home. The whole ordeal was not exactly inconspicuous, even if it all happened during and after sunset.

Several days after the birth, Father Arzaga returned to San Tadeo from his travels. The gossip and whispers of the night of the childbirth unsurprisingly made their way to Arzaga, the biggest gossip in the town. Right after returning and hearing the news, he immediately headed to Juan's house.

"Juan, perfect!" he said when he got to the house and saw the man. "I need to talk to you."

Juan was nervous that this would be about Sara's childbirth, but he kept his composure. "How can I help you, Father?"

"I heard Sara gave birth a few days back," Arzaga started.

"Yes," Juan replied. "My mother, Noe, and I were there. We prayed to Saint Ignatius and to the Virgin. They delivered Sara and the baby from harm!" Juan was not lying; he heard Marta utter at least one prayer to Ignatius. "Hopefully, we can get the baby baptized soon now that you are back," Juan added. "We want to ensure this child is saved from hell."

Arzaga nodded impatiently as Juan gave him all these boring details. "Did anything suspicious happen during this childbirth?" Arzaga asked.

"No, Father. My mother was praying to Saint Ignatius and to the Virgin for assistance and mercy," Juan reemphasized. "I prayed to God, and Noe made sure that Sara stayed safe during the delivery."

"I'm hearing rumors that the delivery took place in Josefina's house. Why was that?" The father made it a point to call everyone in the town by their Christian name, including Lawahin.

Juan froze and dissociated. What was he supposed to say now?

"I also heard that you were outside of Josefina's house dancing around naked with other men," Arzaga stated. "That's a very concerning rumor. What exactly happened?"

Juan took a minute to respond. "We were worried a manananggal would come. We wanted to help in whatever way we could! I wanted my sister and niece to live! I had to do all that I could to protect them!"

"You people and your stupid superstitions," Arzaga grumbled. "Don't you know that if you are faithful, the Lord God will provide? You should've spent that time clothed and praying to Saint Ignatius! Oh, the immaturity and ignorance of you people! Surely it is easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than to get you all to forsake your satanic ways."

"I'm sorry, Father," Juan automatically said. Juan had learned that Arzaga had always to be right. If anyone questioned Arzaga, there would be punishments. It was easier to submit to his tyranny than to fight for one's freedom from him. This was all compounded by the fact that Arzaga held the keys to forgiveness and salvation.

"Now, tell me, how did the sorceress Josefina participate?" Arzaga demanded.

Juan gulped. "She assisted with the birth since she was a midwife. You weren't here, Father. We didn't know what else to do! She was the only person we knew with experience in these things!"

"Why did this all happen at Josefina's house?" Arzaga asked. "Sara could have safely delivered in the comfort of her own home! Josefina's house is surely filled with demonic oils and satanic figures!"

"Josefina had medicines. It was safer to take her to Josefina's house than to have Josefina run back and forth between houses to get what she needed. We couldn't risk it!"

"Did she perform the old rituals to the devil?" Arzaga barked.

"Father, I don't know. I was outside during the whole event," Juan frantically replied. "You already know I was outside naked."

What Arzaga did not know was that Juan did take nearly all of the commandments of the Church seriously, including the eighth commandment – 'Thou shall not bear false witness to thy neighbor.' But Arzaga refused to believe him. Truly, Arzaga refused to believe any of the Tagalogs. He thought Juan was trying to trick him and cover his tracks, something that Arzaga

repeatedly experienced from the Tagalogs who lied to protect themselves from punitive punishments.

"You're useless, just like the rest of you barbarians!"

Arzaga shouted. "Stay away from Josefina! That woman is involved with the devil! She always was! And I do not want to hear about you dancing naked outside again! Someone as feeble and prissy as you should not be naked with other men! God forbid you tempt them to do things against nature!" He then stormed off in the direction of town.

Juan watched as Arzaga disappeared from his sight. He wondered how Arzaga had found out, but then recalled how much of the town had watched Sara get carried from her house to Lawahin's. Anybody could have reported what happened. In truth, Juan and the other men were not hiding themselves while fighting the manananggal. Two of the men were naked on the roof. If King David could catch Bathsheba bathing on the roof, surely the townspeople could see two men naked on the roof fighting a soaring demon.

* * *

The next morning, the people of San Tadeo were gathered at the pavilion by the river, the same pavilion Simoyin, Lawahin, and their village had first visited when they arrived in

San Tadeo. Father Arzaga was in the pavilion with Lawahin, who had her hands tied behind her back. An armed Tagalog loyal to Arzaga stood behind her with a whip in hand.

Once most of the town had gathered into or around the pavilion, Arzaga began to speak. "My children! My simple-minded children. It has come to my attention that Josefina here has slipped back into the old practices of the devil. She honored the devil and performed ceremonies for him instead of praying to God and the saints! She claims to have done this out of the love and safety of a neighbor, but she risked damning herself, her neighbor, and the whole town!"

The priest continued. "Her house was searched, and we found all sorts of demonic substances and symbols. This woman, this witch, this agent of the devil, was working with the enemies of God all under our noses!"

Arzaga signaled to the armed Tagalog, who positioned himself behind Lawahin and pushed her face down onto the floor of the pavilion. The Tagalog then began whipping the woman repeatedly. The town was forced to witness the punishment of Lawahin's 'crimes.' Several of her neighbors began to gasp once blood started pouring from the lashings. Lawahin took the whippings bravely, but began to whimper after several floggings.

The man whipped her dozens of times, and with each strike, Arzaga's smug face slowly grew into a masochistic smile. Finally, after what felt like hours, the man finished flogging Lawahin.

"Let this be a lesson to you all," Arzaga announced once the whipping stopped. "Those who revert back to the devil will be punished as such!" He pulled out a knife and cut her tied hands free. "If you rebel against God the same way Judas did, you will be killed!" Arzaga then lightly kicked Lawahin's wounded body over. "Now go, and sin no more!"

The crowd stood in a silence that was only broken by the quiet sobs coming from Lawahin.

"We do this because we love you," Arzaga stated. "We cannot have you risk falling into the eternal pit. These sins will kill you and destroy your families! In the name of the Lord, cease your idolatry!" Arzaga paused and stared out into the crowd. "You may now return to your labors."

The townspeople slowly sauntered back to their homes and fields. Lawahin stayed prostrate on the floor of the pavilion, breathing deeply, with blood pouring out of the multiple wounds on her back. Marta, feeling pity for what happened to the woman who helped her family several days before, went to Lawahin's

side and began aiding her. Juan watched as his mother assisted Lawahin back to her house. Days later, Juan would hear from Sara that when his mother got Lawahin to her home, she followed the verbal directions of Lawahin, made an ointment from the readily available herbs outside of her house, and painstakingly applied the ointment to Lawahin's wounds. Marta did not like these medicines since they were associated with the devil, but she did not know how else to thank the woman who saved her daughter's life. In that moment, Marta felt as though salvation was more likely to come to Lawahin than to Arzaga. How could saving a life - two lives - be so brutally punished?

Chapter 13

Mabuhay

To keep the Filipino docile, it must be repeated to him day after day what he is, to convince him that he is incompetent.

Juan spent the remainder of the day petrified. He went back to the fields and spent his time thinking about what happened to Lawahin. The message of 'love' that the priest was trying to share with the town did not make sense to Juan. "How could such an awful performance be a symbol of love?" he thought. "And to do all of that publicly to humiliate her even more! Was hell really that terrible that people needed to be physically punished to avoid it?"

He could not help but wonder if any Tagalog would escape the destiny hell. Father Arzaga obsessed over hell and threatened hell to everyone he preached to or received confessions from. Was it love that caused so much harm to someone who was only trying to help? Is this what God wanted?

Is this who God was? Is this self-proclaimed God of love really a destructive, tyrannical God that reigns in blood and horror?

Juan thought deeply about the Catholic faith and the catechisms. There was a heavy emphasis on the suffering and death of Christ. Those who could take the communion were literally drinking the blood of Christ and eating his flesh. So much brutality and violence centered around the God of the Catholic faith. Were humans expected to undergo the same amount of suffering? Was everyone supposed to be crucified in their own way? Was that the actual price of salvation?

The workday finally ended, and Juan went to the stream to bathe and headed for Lawahin's home afterward. He entered to see her alone, huddled in the corner, quietly recovering from the abuses of earlier.

"Lawahin," Juan began, "I'm so sorry."

She looked up to see Juan at the entrance of her house. "Juan, it's not your fault. You can't be responsible for the sins of Arzaga."

"Yes, it is my fault," Juan responded. "I shouldn't have said anything to Father Arzaga."

"Juan," Lawahin stated, "I know it wasn't your fault. You weren't there during the delivery. You don't know what happened

inside. There was no possible way for you to accuse me of 'witchcraft.'"

"I still shouldn't have said anything," Juan said. "He came, got mad at me for being naked, asked if you started honoring the devil, and..."

"And you told him you didn't know," she said.

"Yes."

"You're so predictable," she responded. "You would never lie to Arzaga. That's why I know it wasn't you. And, to be realistic, we didn't do the best job keeping the whole event a secret from the town. We carried Sara into my house as she was screaming in pain. The town heard and saw. This was all inevitable."

"Are you okay?" Juan asked.

"I will be," Lawahin reassured him. "It still burns, but it will heal. Sara had it worse than I did in her delivery. More importantly, Sara and the girl are alive. This is a small price to pay for the life of a mother and daughter."

After a brief pause, Juan said, "You really knew what you were doing during the delivery. Thank you for helping Sara. I don't know if it was a sin or not, but I know you saved my sister."

"There was a year or so where I was the only midwife in the village up in the mountains. I didn't perform many childbirths, but I performed enough to remember what to do. This art was passed down from my mother and from her mother all the way back from the beginning."

"After delivering so many babies, did you ever want to have children?" Juan asked.

"Yes," she responded, "but when I was younger. After relocating here," Lawahin winced as she lifted her body to face Juan, "it became clear that motherhood would never become a reality for me. I should consider myself lucky, though, because I might have died giving birth down here." She paused for a moment. "Plus, I don't know how I would feel about bringing a life into this world of violence and suppression."

"Do you regret marrying Simoyin?" Juan asked.

Lawahin thought for a bit and then let out a sigh. "No. We needed to be together, and we loved each other." She paused for a moment. "It wasn't your traditional love, but it was love nonetheless. Simoyin would have been killed without me. And they took care of me during that difficult time. We needed each other."

In an impulsive reaction, Lawahin asked Juan's question back to him: "Why aren't you married yet?"

Juan panicked at first. But he realized that he trusted Lawahin enough to answer honestly. After all, she did just save his sister. "I don't think I'm ready," he replied. "And, honestly, I really don't want to get married."

Lawahin looked surprised. "You're not ready? But you're managing the farm and caring for your family. You even went out of your way to help with your sister's delivery! You fended off a manananggal!"

"Marriage is different," Juan replied. "To give myself to a woman? I don't know if I could do that."

"Could you give yourself to a man?" Lawahin asked.

Juan blushed and turned his head to the side to hide his reaction from Lawahin. He refused to answer the question and sat there in silence. The thought of marrying a man had occasionally crossed his mind in the years after Simoyin's passing. It was an option in the days before Catholicism, but not anymore under the 'light and progress' of Christianity. Juan, however, would never admit this aloud. He was too ashamed to even dwell on the thought.

After sensing that Juan would not answer her question, Lawahin began speaking. "Juan, life is harder now that we do not have our liberty. Yet life is too short for you to do any more things you do not want to do. You need to choose how to live this life, but you also need to protect yourself."

Juan thought about what Lawahin said and, after some time, asked, "What do you mean?"

"I married Simoyin, in part, to protect myself. It became clear that women here in the lowlands have lost a lot of autonomy and are under the control of their husbands. Marrying Simoyin protected me and them. Simoyin would never have abused their control of me."

"Was life really better in the mountains?" Juan asked.

"It was," Lawahin responded. "If only you could have the chance to live the life we once lived."

"A life without God?" he asked. "I don't know if I could do that."

Lawahin looked out her window for a minute as a breeze entered her home. "I have lived two lives. One in the mountains, and one here in San Tadeo. They have both been so incredibly different, but if I could, I would go back to the mountains again to end my life in absolute freedom."

Juan sat in silence for a moment. "Why didn't you flee into the mountains after Simoyin died? A lot of people have done that, especially on nights when Arzaga is away."

Lawahin turned and looked at Juan. "Perhaps it is the same reason why you have not done so, either. You know, deep down, away from the foreigners, there is more freedom. I understand you believe in their religion, but you know a life without their religion is a life with more choices. A vibrant life that brings color and hope into your world, outshining the dullness of a religion so infused with blood and fear. So, I ask you, Juan, why haven't you fled to the mountains already?"

Juan silently thought for a minute or so. "I know the Christian faith is real," he finally mustered out. "Despite all of my doubts, and knowing that life is more confined here in the town, I know this life is what is best for me, even without the colors and vibrancy." He paused shortly. "I know it doesn't make sense, and I don't expect a lot of people to understand me, but there is an indescribable power that the Church brings into my life. It gives me purpose, and it just feels right. Leaving it just feels... wrong. So wrong. And that's all I really know."

Lawahin sighed and was clearly disappointed. "I think you're right, Juan," she said. "You shouldn't marry a woman. It's

not right for you. You can do so much with your life as a man, anyway.”

This planted a seed in Juan’s heart. Days ago, Gabriel Tagulan had revealed to Juan that he did not want to get married. Now Lawahin was actively giving him advice to avoid marriage, in part, to live a life of freedom.

The two continued to talk for several minutes, and then Juan parted ways with Lawahin. On his way home, he tried imagining a life in the mountains away from the Church. The thought brought feelings of freedom and feelings of guilt. The Church was such a source of pain in Juan's life, but he could not admit this to himself. Daydreaming about a life without the Church gave him a glimmer of forbidden hope that he would not entertain for long. "I need the Church," he told himself as he walked home. "I am nothing without it." He then felt a deep sense of guilt overpowering him for even questioning. The Church was the only thing stable in his life, and it was the only thing that made sense. To whom else would he go? The Church had the words of eternal life.

Chapter 14

Kuha

And you, the religion preached for a suffering humanity, you must have forgotten your mission to comfort the oppressed in their misery, and to humble the powerful in their pride.

Juan had not forgotten Rolando's invitation. His sister's birth, of course, took precedence over drinking with Rolando, but now that everything had settled with Noe and Sara, he could visit Rolando, as promised. In his culture, invitations were relatively open. If somebody invited you over, you could go whenever you liked. Days and times from Spanish clocks and calendars had not yet permeated Tagalog society. Life was simpler and more liberal without worrying about time.

On the day of his visit to Rolando's house, Juan finished his farming duties quickly, bathed himself, and headed towards the town center. Rolando and his family lived relatively close to the church since Rolando's father worked directly with the

priests. Having enormous wealth, they lived in a multi-roomed house that was occasionally used for different town events. This was expected for a datu, both current and former. The leader of a village or town needed to have the right accommodations to take care of the people they served. The house was a popular place in town, and at any given time of day, a number of people could be seen gathered outside.

When Juan arrived at their house, he called out towards the front door to make his presence known, and Rolando welcomed him into the house. Rolando escorted him through two rooms until they ended up in a small, isolated room in the corner of the house. The room had a few mats on the ground and a large container with two straws poking out of the opening. Rolando beckoned Juan to squat next to his side in front of the vase, where the two of them began to sip the contents: rice wine.

Juan felt it was strange that they were drinking in an isolated spot of the house as many people in the town drank together outside of their homes and would invite passing neighbors to come and join them. But Juan assumed that Rolando wanted more privacy in doing so. Maybe Rolando wanted to make sure that only he and Juan would drink together

and that a passerby would not try to join. Perhaps this would be an opportunity for the two to bond.

"I heard that your sister had a baby," Rolando stated after taking a rather large sip of wine.

"Yeah, a girl," Juan responded.

"But why did she go to that witch Josefina?" Rolando bluntly asked.

"Oh," Juan chuckled out of nervousness, "Father Arzaga was gone, and nobody else was available to help."

"You could've come to me," Rolando said before sipping more wine.

Juan was confused. "I didn't know you could help with that."

"I can't," Rolando replied, "but I could have connected you with women in the Church who could have helped."

Juan wanted to defend Lawahin, but chose not to. He did not want to ruin this wonderful opportunity Rolando had given him.

Rolando continued, "I also heard you were outside naked at the house. Following the old tradition, right?"

Juan gulped. "Yeah, it's what we needed to do to protect Sara."

"Have you ever done that before?" Rolando asked.

"No," Juan replied. "I honestly just followed directions and copied what the other guys were doing."

"I wish I were there to see it," Rolando smirked. "Seeing you naked trying to battle a manananggal... that must have been quite the show!"

Juan wanted to change the subject. The topic was making him feel awkward. "How are your classes going?" he asked.

Rolando began showing off by spewing a few phrases in Latin. Juan had no idea what he said but was very impressed by his ability to start speaking in a different language with little warning. The wine, of course, helped Rolando do this.

The two continued to small talk until the rice wine ran out. "Give me a minute," Rolando told Juan as he exited the room. A few moments later, Rolando reentered with a larger container with more wine. He refilled their sipping container and began drinking more.

Juan had had enough alcohol for one night, but it would have been rude for him to stop. So, he continued to sip, but only took tiny sips of wine. Rolando was doing the opposite and was

clearly getting intoxicated. The more inebriated he became, the more alcohol he took with every sip.

"You know," Rolando began telling Juan, "this life of having my dad collect taxes is not as great as everyone says it is."

"Why's that? Doesn't it pay well?" Juan asked.

"Nobody likes a tax collector, especially when they have a service fee added on top of the taxes," Rolando said. "But how else is he supposed to make a living?"

"That is a fair point," Juan said, taking a small sip from the vase. "Your dad can't just collect taxes for free, and everybody hates taxes."

"It's hard, too," Rolando continued, "because... because... our family is so big. Yet I'm the oldest. So, I'll take over for my dad when he's old."

"Do you want that job?" Juan asked.

"Yeah..." Rolando thought. "The money is really good. But my siblings will depend on me. And that's a lot when you have eight siblings."

"You must take good care of them now," Juan said. "You'll take even better care of them once you take over for your dad."

Rolando liked the compliment. "Yeah... I do. Working with the church has given me many benefits to help my family. And Father Arzaga trusts me."

"Weren't you able to get your brother out of serving his public labor tax with the Spanish?" Juan asked.

"Oh," Rolando chuckled. "That was my dad who did that. He pays other people to do the public labor tax for us. Plus, the church needs us here, anyway. We already do so much for them, anyway."

"But you'll be expected to help your siblings out in the future once you collect taxes?"

"Yeah," Rolando thought. "Hopefully, I can help them get good jobs to support themselves. I don't want to support them forever."

Rolando paused for a moment. Juan looked over at him to see Rolando's eyes wide open with a clear frown. Tears began to fill Rolando's eyes. Rolando hid his face from Juan and began quietly sobbing.

"Rolando," Juan said, "what's wrong?"

"I hate being the oldest!" Rolando sobbed. "There's so much pressure placed on me! And now with Spanish control, we don't know how anything will be in the future!" Rolando paused

to catch his breath through the tears. "There has been so much change in the past twenty years. Will I actually inherit my dad's job? Will somebody else get it? What will happen if I don't get it?"

Juan listened intently. He knew he couldn't help Rolando with his situation, but he could listen, especially since Rolando needed to let all of these worries out. Juan only had to worry about caring for his mother and the Church. All of his siblings were, fortunately, financially independent from him. They were all poor and in debt, but they supported themselves.

"My father was a datu years ago," Rolando continued. "He was loved and respected by our whole village. Now he's hated because he's the tax collector! And I'll be hated, too. And my family, my brothers, my sisters, they'll all depend on me. And I'll be expected to marry and have kids and support them with my siblings and their spouses and kids. I don't know how I will do it!"

Rolando began loudly sobbing. "I just wish I were a farmer."

Juan knew he could never understand what Rolando was going through. Rolando was born with so much wealth and power that Juan could never have. Yet, it did seem stressful to be the firstborn of such a large family and to have all of these

expectations placed on him. Juan, of course, was looking at Rolando with favorable eyes since Juan was fond of him. Rolando served the Church. He must have been a good man. Good men do not deserve difficult lives.

As Rolando sobbed, Juan stood up and lifted Rolando up. Juan brought Rolando close to him and hugged him. After sobbing a bit, Rolando hugged Juan back. "I don't know what to do, Rolando," Juan told him mid-embrace. "Just know you have a friend in me. I care about you, and I want you to be happy. If you need a drink or a hug, I'm here for you. I'm sorry that that's all I can do, but you're not alone."

The two hugged for a few minutes until Rolando's sobs began to fade into whimpers and then end altogether. Juan broke the hug and stood back. Rolando just stared at Juan in his drunken state with red, puffy eyes. Without warning, Rolando grabbed Juan's face and kissed him on the mouth. He backed away again and stared at Juan with an expression of longing. Again, he pulled Juan's face in and kissed him and forced his tongue into Juan's mouth.

Juan pushed himself away. "No, Rolando, I don't want this." This was the truth. Juan wanted to be obedient to the

Church. He knew what Rolando was doing was sinful in the eyes of the Church. And, more critically, it could lead to the pyre.

"Please," Rolando responded, "I need this. Just a kiss."

He forced Juan's head to his and kissed Juan's mouth again.

Juan pulled back, "Rolando, I just want to be your friend. The hug was just to help you. I'm here for you, I promise! I just can't do kissing."

Rolando pulled Juan into an awkward embrace and began kissing his neck. "It's okay, Juan, no one has to know. I need this. I need you."

At that moment, Juan froze. His mind drifted off into a world of panic. What was going to happen to him? Would this send him straight to hell? What if Arzaga found out? Would this lead to his death? A thousand scenarios played out in Juan's head as Rolando began doing whatever he wanted to Juan.

"Rolando, stop," Juan begged, "I don't want this. I only wanted to help you and hug you." But Rolando kept going. He began groping Juan's groin. Juan tried to move Rolando's hand up onto his torso, but Rolando grabbed Juan's hand, forcefully held the hand against Juan's torso, and put his other hand back onto Juan's groin. He then put his hand inside Juan's clothes and began touching his groin however he pleased.

Juan stood there frozen. "Please stop," he whispered with a tear shedding out of his eye. "I don't want this." Juan wanted to scream, but he knew if he made a scene, it would only make things worse. Punching Rolando was not an option. His family was powerful, and they would surely retaliate. And he was in their home! Juan remembered back to Lawahin getting lashed in public. He felt completely and utterly helpless.

Rolando continued kissing and touching. "If it feels good, how can it be bad?" Rolando asked. He then sank to the floor and tried to pull Juan down with him. Juan, still frozen, stood there and could not be gently pulled down. Rolando yanked on Juan's arms and forced him to collapse on the floor. Rolando then straddled Juan and began kissing him more vigorously. "You like that?" he asked Juan. "It feels good, right? You want to help me out, Juan? Stop resisting!"

The rest of the time with Rolando was a blur to Juan. Time felt like it both stopped and moved quickly. All he knew was that Rolando had raped him, but Juan did not resist as he should have. He just panicked and froze. His resistance was just words and moving a hand away. Was it actually rape? Did Juan secretly want this because of how fond he was of Rolando? Did Juan choose to please Rolando over pleasing God?

When Rolando was finished defiling Juan and stripping him of his agency, he rolled onto the floor, quietly said, "Atta boy," and fell asleep. Juan could not stay there after everything that happened. He got up and quietly snuck out of the house. It was already dark out, and Juan had to make the journey back to his family's home in the night.

He walked through the rice paddies, hearing the loud croaking of the frogs in the water around him. The longer he walked, the more he began to notice the filth that was all over his body. Saliva was everywhere on him, dried up and making his skin itchy. He felt dried blood cracking on his skin as he continued to walk. Juan could not go home like this. Instead of stopping at his house, he walked to the stream he regularly bathed at. The stream was empty, as expected at this time of night, and Juan washed himself vigorously. Once satisfied that the exterior of his body was clean enough, he washed his clothes, getting rid of whatever filth Rolando had put on them. Juan tried to do what he could to rid himself of the uncleanness that had happened to him, but no matter how well he cleaned his body and clothes, the filth remained in his soul.

Chapter 15

Kumpisal

And would these sacrifices produce the fruits I hope for?

After spending nearly an hour cleaning at the stream, Juan headed back home and went to sleep. He woke up the next morning still feeling confused and disgusted. Juan could not bring himself to eat breakfast due to the shame that overwhelmed him, so he went straight to the paddies. During his day's work, he continued to replay the previous night's events repeatedly in his head. The hug. The kissing. The touching. The groping. The use of force. The penetration. Was Juan even innocent? Replaying these horrifying scenes in his mind made him feel complicit. He must be guilty if he thought this way. He barely did anything to stop it. He wanted it. He said no, he fought back a little, but he wanted it. He had to want it, even though he did not want it.

Then the thought came to Juan: "It was a mortal sin! Leaving it unconfessed would lead to hell." The thought made Juan want to vomit. Panic set in as he thought of the grave consequences of his inaction. But if others found out, he would be burned at the stake. What was he supposed to do?

Juan continued to wrestle with these emotions as he worked the paddies. Two thoughts came to his head that encouraged him on what to do next. First was a story he remembered Father Cruz taught in catechism: the story of the ancient prophet Abraham. Abraham spent years praying for a son, and God sent him Isaac in Abraham's old age. Then, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, which Abraham did because he trusted God above all else. Fortunately, an angel intervened and saved his son at the last second.

The story made Juan think back on his current situation. What he was commanded to do in order to be cleansed from the sins of the previous night was to confess. That is where the second thought came to his mind: the seal of confidentiality. Arzaga could not divulge his sins to the public, which could, in turn, protect him from the punitive law. This was his escape from his sins.

Juan wanted it. He did not fight back hard enough. He said no. He pushed back. He was violated. He was thrown onto the ground. He was internally beaten. He lost some blood. But he did not stop it. He had to have wanted it. This awful event rested on his shoulders.

Juan had made up his mind. He was going to confess. Finishing his work early, Juan bathed and headed to the church. Father Arzaga was inside the chapel tending to the altar. "Father," Juan said, entering the church, "I need to confess."

Without saying a word, Arzaga beckoned Juan to an open bench near the front of the chapel where the two would sit to talk. "Give me a moment," Arzaga said. "I need to get the confession manual." Arzaga went to one of the back rooms behind the chapel and returned with a book in hand. He sat down next to Juan, opened the book, and asked, "What commandment did you violate?"

"The sixth," Juan said.

"I see," Arzaga said, opening the manual. The priest was not surprised because many people 'violated' this commandment. He began asking a myriad of yes and no questions related to sexual cleanliness. Juan mostly answered no to these questions, hinting towards his 'purity.' However,

Arzaga was insistent on asking all of the questions in the manual to ensure no sin went unconfessed. Or, at least that was Arzaga's explanation.

Juan's stomach dropped when Arzaga asked the following: "Have you sinned in any manner with another man like you?"

Juan froze. He sat in silence for several minutes, refusing to make eye contact with Arzaga. After a while, Juan spoke up. "Yes," he whispered.

Arzaga followed with another question: "Have you done something to cause you to have pollution in a manner that it left your body outside the ordinary place, which is the body of a woman?"

"Yes," Juan whispered.

Arzaga stopped reading the book. "This is a great crime, Juan," he said, disappointedly. "Who did you do this to?"

"Rolando Kulog," Juan answered.

This confession shocked Arzaga. "Rolando? No. He's too honorable to do that. This cannot be true. He's one of the best of the confraternity!"

"He forced me to," Juan confessed. "I think he forced me to."

"You must have tempted him!" Arzaga shouted. "What were you two doing?"

"Drinking, Father," Juan replied.

"You got him drunk and then tempted him with your body and your mannerisms." Arzaga surmised. "What a disgrace! He serves the Church, and the Church is investing in him, and you tempted him to commit a mortal sin. A disgusting mortal sin at that!"

"Father, I couldn't stop him," Juan began. "He wouldn't..."

"This is filth, and you are not contrite," Arzaga stated. "You are placing the blame of your sins onto Rolando. You have no shame in doing that, you animal!"

Juan could not admit his guilt to Arzaga because there was no guilt. There was no sin, just shame and heart-wrenching pain. Arzaga, unfortunately, took this as an insincere confession - a confession that could not merit absolution.

"When did this happen?" Arzaga asked.

"Last night, Father," Juan responded.

"You cannot partake of the Holy Eucharist until you come back to me with contrition," Arzaga ordered. "You need penance for your perversions."

"But Father, it was..." Juan started.

"I am a servant of God," Arzaga interrupted, rather loudly, "and I am the shepherd of this town. You come here confessing crimes against nature with no contrition. You blame Rolando for your sins? There is no contrition there! You must accept that you tempted this good man. You cannot lie and say Rolando forced you!"

Juan looked around the chapel to see the open windows and the open door of the church. He saw people walking about and worried that they could hear everything that was being said. This caused Juan to panic even more. He began visibly shaking. Was this confession really private? Did everyone around the church just hear his confession?

Arzaga felt no shame and frequently shouted during open confessions. He wanted the people of the town to hear. To him, shame was the only way the Tagalogs would 'stop' sinning. And, since his ministry occurred before the introduction of confessional booths to the Philippines, it was very easy to make confessions more public than necessary.

"Father, I did not want it to happen," Juan finally stated, secretly hoping that would at least absolve him in the eyes of any outside ears that were listening to the confession. "I tried to stop

him. He forced my hand down. He dragged me onto the floor. He said there was nothing wrong if nobody found out!"

"You are lying!" Arzaga responded. "Rolando would never do something so disgusting! How dare you even think he would! How do I know that *you* are not the person that forced him?"

"I am in so much pain, Father," Juan responded. "Help me."

"I can only help you when you have contrition and honesty," Arzaga spouted.

"I just wanted to be a good friend," Juan responded, quietly breaking into tears. "He was so sad! He vented to me, and he needed a hug. I didn't want him to feel alone. That's all I wanted to do was to hug him! Nothing more!"

Arzaga stood from the bench. "You cannot partake of the Eucharist until you come back with the truth. I cannot absolve you when you refuse to admit your sin!" He closed the confession manual and stormed off into the other room.

Juan sat silently on the bench. He refused to leave the church with so many people out and about outside. He knew his eyes would be red and tear-stained, and he feared how people would react if he left immediately with tears on his face. Arzaga

was incredibly loud, as well. Juan knew that the people heard parts of the confession on the streets. Did the people out on the roads even go as far as to stop and quietly listen to the entirety of this 'confidential' confession?

Juan looked towards the front of the chapel. The reredos behind the altar was humble, with just an image of the crucified Christ, the Santo Niño, and the Virgin. Juan fell onto his knees, facing the altar and reredos. Juan began to mutter the Hail Mary repeatedly. "What do I need to do to be saved from hell?" he asked in between his prayers. "Am I guilty of a mortal sin?" As he continued his Hail Marys, Juan began to doubt himself even more. "Perhaps I am responsible for what has happened. I shouldn't have hugged Rolando. I tempted him. I am a whore."

* * *

Once Juan felt that enough time had passed, he made his way out of the church and back to his house. Without entering the house, he found a small whip that he used for the carabao when he was working the fields. He snuck off with the whip into the jungles close to his house. Once in a secluded space, confident that no one was around to witness what he was about to do, Juan began whipping himself. This self-flagellation, Juan felt, would be the only way he could truly bring himself to

humility. He recalled the words of Father Cruz before he died: flagellation was an extreme act of penance that showed close devotion to Christ and his suffering. Christ was beaten, and with His stripes, we are healed. Juan, in turn, felt that he had to heal himself by creating his own stripes. The same way Lawahin was healed through the stripes she received in front of the whole town.

Juan deserved to be punished. What he did was unforgivable. Suffering was the only way he could atone for defiling Rolando, the righteous son of San Tadeo.

Chapter 16

Kalag

Is that the law of Jesus Christ? For this it was not necessary for God to have Himself crucified.

The following Sunday, Juan and his family went to mass, which, of course, was being led by Father Arzaga. In San Tadeo, Arzaga and the late Father Cruz only offered baptism and penance to all converts. They did not trust giving communion or confirmation to many of the converts because the priests thought these converts would never be strong enough in the faith and would sacrilege the blood and body of Christ by taking the Eucharist unworthily or unprepared. Those who converted while they were young and were sufficiently indoctrinated during their youth, however, were allotted to have their first communion and confirmations. Their minds were more malleable and easier to influence, especially through years of service and catechisms. Indeed, Juan spent much of his childhood with the elderly

catechumens in the church, including Simoyin, and, perhaps as a reward for Marta's devotion to her confraternity, Cruz allowed Marta and Juan to receive communion and confirmation. They proved to be less of a risk for apostasy than many of the other converts.

To have the opportunity to partake of the Eucharist during mass was a privilege with a bit of fanfare. The entire town was expected to attend Sunday mass or be punished. A number of the youth and young adults could partake of communion, as well as members of the confraternities. Those 'worthy' of taking the Eucharist did this in front of the entire town – all their peers and neighbors. If they did not take communion, the townspeople would surely gossip.

The expectation to take the Eucharist created an atmosphere of secrecy. To Juan's knowledge, he never saw any of his peers not take the Eucharist after their first communion. This was because of the stigma surrounding being honest with God and the Church. Many withheld their confessions or only confessed to avoid physical and public punishment. Others who were more favored by Arzaga would confess and immediately receive absolution. It was Arzaga, not Christ, who forgave sins.

This particular mass, for the most part, was an unremarkable event. Juan, however, felt this mass was different. It was different because he would not be able to partake of the Eucharist, and all would see. Even if he tried to go up to take it, Arzaga would not give it to him. In fact, Arzaga would make a scene shooing Juan away from the body of Christ. Juan's only option was to stay seated when his peers were called to partake. He knew that once people saw him staying seated during the receiving of the communion, they would know he had committed a mortal sin. Worst of all, they would wonder what mortal sin he had committed.

Juan wondered how many people heard his 'private' confession. Would whispers spread through the town of Juan, accusing people of 'unnatural' sins? Would this lead to eventual punishment? Could he be burned at the stake? Did he deserve to die in flames? Would Arzaga let him confess and allow his neck to be broken before being lit on fire? Juan's paranoia flooded his mind with ridiculous questions and circumstances as he sat and listened to this dreadful mass.

Juan was defeated. Even his family would notice that he was not going up to receive communion. What an embarrassment to them! What a shame he was to his family and

his community! Juan was surely a disgrace to his entire town and to God Himself.

The priest finally blessed the Eucharist and invited those able to partake to come forward. Juan stayed seated, even though his mother arose and went to participate. Marta looked at him with a confused expression on her face. Juan looked around and saw many eyes on him and people whispering to each other. It was blatantly apparent that Juan 'did' something wrong.

Much to Juan's horror, he watched as Rolando, a member of the confraternity and a privileged member of society, stand in line to receive the Eucharist. He, the one who perpetuated the sin, was allowed to receive no consequences for his actions. The servant of God, the shepherd of the town, Father Arzaga, who had heard Juan's confession days earlier, allowed Rolando to take the Eucharist after hearing what Rolando had done. Juan watched as the priest laid the host on Rolando's tongue.

"What a mockery!" Juan thought as his blood began to boil. "Is nothing sacred in this house of God? Is this a God of favors and corruption?"

Juan watched as Rolando turned around to return to his seat. The two made eye contact, but Rolando quickly and

shamefully looked away. Hiding his face from Juan, Rolando shuffled over to his seat and promptly sat down. It was almost as though Rolando's actions were a non-verbal admission of guilt.

Though his blood boiled, Juan felt immense shame. Everyone just witnessed Juan refuse to take the Eucharist. He knew this would lead to countless rumors about him. Would people ever look at him the same again? And what did God think of him? Was Juan incapable of forgiveness and redemption, while Rolando was? Could Rolando, Arzaga, Cruz, and countless others do horrible things to Juan in the name of God with absolute justification? At the same time, could Juan ever taste salvation simply for being the evil man he was?

When the mass ended and the people began to leave, Juan darted out of the church as quickly as he could. He avoided eye contact with everyone and immediately headed home. In avoiding everyone, Juan left his own family behind at the church for his own safety. He wondered if he could ever be safe again, even around his own family. Could he even return home safely?

After leaving the church, the townspeople took the opportunity after mass to converse. Marta was approached by several women who began telling her a patchwork of things they had heard outside the church during the confession.

Interestingly, despite Juan's feminine mannerisms, the townspeople assumed Juan and Rolando did 'unclean' things to women. Rolando surely would not do anything 'filthy' with the same sex. He was a man of God! It was almost treasonous to accuse a former datu's son of something so degrading in the eyes of the Church. The two, as 'friends,' were only mischievously breaking sacred boundaries with some women of the town. It was simply manly endeavors. "Men have their needs," one pious woman told Marta.

* * *

After arriving home, Juan panicked and paced. What was he supposed to do now? He knew very well people would congregate outside the church and banter with each other. He knew people heard his confession. What were they going to tell his mother? His siblings? Noe? Juan had been naked with Noe! Would Noe feel violated now that he knew that his brother-in-law was a male temptress who undressed with him on the night of his wife's delivery? Did Juan try to seduce Noe? Did Juan subconsciously get Lawahin so that he would be forced to get naked with Noe and his friends?

Juan ran outside and began vomiting at the foot of his house. He panted as he sweated profusely and fought a myriad

of demonizing thoughts. Juan quickly covered his vomit with dirt and began heading towards the mountains. All he knew was that he just had to get away from the town right at that moment. Only the mountains could provide the secure solitude that he needed right at that moment.

It was not unusual for townspeople to head towards the mountains. They usually did this to hunt or to fish. Arzaga was not fond of them doing so because so many Tagalogs had fled the Christian towns and hid in the mountains, but Arzaga knew the people needed to use the mountains for their survival. And with their survival came his tithes, the very thing that ensured Arzaga's survival and gluttony.

Juan reached the foot of a mountain and began stumbling into the jungle that covered it. He wandered for several minutes until he found a stream with a boulder right beside it. Lifting himself onto the boulder, Juan sat atop of it and gazed into the stream as it thoughtlessly ran down toward the town.

A lump formed in Juan's throat. "I liked Rolando," he quietly admitted to himself. "I must have let him do this to me." He felt as though his mind was splitting in two. There was no disputing Rolando's guilt in what happened. But what was Juan's role? Did he do this to himself?

The entire situation made Juan feel like he was going crazy. The external pressure made it worse. Arzaga was clear in placing the blame on Juan, even after Juan gave him the information about what had happened. Maybe this was God's will? Arzaga was a shepherd and a servant of God. Would a servant of God withhold absolution from a repentant sinner? Why would Juan dare to question the will of God or the servant of God? Where was his humility? Did Juan make the story up himself? Was Juan the perpetrator and Rolando the victim?

The thought of the humiliation being God's will confused Juan even more. Deep down, Juan knew he had been attacked, but was the assault his fault? Juan did feel pleasure during the horrifying ordeal, granted it was a pleasure that was overpowered by pain, blood, and terror. Perhaps the pleasure is what made him sinful.

But how was Rolando forgiven, and why was Juan not? Rolando clearly started it. Even if Juan did sin, he resisted. Surely there was piety in his fight against Rolando, even if he did not fight hard enough.

The avalanche of thoughts was dizzying to Juan. After spending hours in hiding and seeing the sunlight dissipate from the jungle, he began making his way towards his home in the

darkness of night with the full intention of not speaking to anyone. After stumbling and trembling to his house, he entered as quietly as he could. Fortunately for Juan, his family had all gone to bed for the night. Exhausted from this internal battle, he fell onto his side and went to sleep. Unfortunately, he would not rest from these thoughts in his sleep. Juan had repeated nightmares of his night with Rolando, his confession, his place in the Church, and the relentless hell that awaited him.

Chapter 17

Sumbong

We pay no attention to these excommunications! We all are already excommunicated.

For the next several days, Juan avoided public gatherings. He felt that he was being watched everywhere he went and that people somehow knew what happened to him. In reality, the people had stopped caring. The gossip was exciting on the Sunday when Juan did not go up to receive the Eucharist, but the juiciness of the gossip had dried up by Sunday night. In their opinions, anyone could fall victim to a mortal sin. Many had committed mortal sins and simply never confessed. Almost all the townspeople did not even believe they could go to Catholic heaven. They were preparing their lives for purgatory.

Juan was in the right, however, in avoiding Rolando. Whenever Juan was in town or saw Rolando out in the rice paddies or near streams, he avoided him. It was clear to Juan

that Rolando could not be trusted. Though Juan could believe some of the lies the Church told him, he could not believe the lies Arzaga said about Rolando. Rolando was not acted upon, nor was Rolando innocent. Juan knew what he had done, and he needed to avoid him at all costs.

This, however, broke Juan's heart. He thought so highly of Rolando, and he watched this hero and this potential friend fall from the pedestal he had placed him on. This man, this noble saint, had fallen from the heavens and had joined the hordes of demons that only sought to inflict pain and proclaim lies. Juan's life seemed to lose color as he was forced to pick up the fragments of the truth he once thought he knew and piece together another dimmer and more terrible truth.

One evening, while bathing, Gabriel Tagulan, the man who gave him a yam, joined him in the stream. The two proceeded to chat, initiated mainly by Gabriel. After a few moments of chatting and Juan continually shutting Gabriel and his questions down, Gabriel decided to change the subject.

"You haven't been yourself, Juan," Gabriel boldly told him. "What is going on?"

Juan knew he had to come up with something that was not about the rape. Gabriel was a nice man, but he could not

trust him. Juan felt as though he could not trust anyone anymore. Indeed, the only person he told about the rape was the virtuous Father Arzaga.

"Things have been off since Sara gave birth," Juan vaguely responded. "Ever since Lawahin was publicly lashed, I feel as though it was my fault." This was an honest concern Juan had, but it was clearly a cover story for the actual atrocities that happened to him.

"Arzaga and his pride," Gabriel said. "The man looks for any excuse to shame anyone in town to lift himself up publicly. He acts like he is an anito, and God is nearly a supporting actor in his fantasy world."

Juan's ears perked. The only other person he heard criticize Arzaga so openly was Lawahin.

"It doesn't matter what the truth is to him," Gabriel continued, "he will punish whomever he can for any accusation. He doesn't take these accusations to trial. He doesn't look for evidence or have both parties submerge in the river. He decides what the truth is and runs with it. To him, he is the supreme anito."

The Tagalogs had an old custom of sending two conflicting parties to a river, lake, or ocean and forcing the two

parties to submerge themselves completely underwater.

Whoever could hold their breath the longest underwater was assumed to be the one telling the truth. Some of the Spanish tried to end this practice, but the Spanish did not attempt to bring any other form of justice to the islands.

"Juan," Gabriel started, "whatever is going on, you didn't do wrong. Especially if Arzaga is the one determining what is true."

This statement shocked Juan. For once, somebody was trying to understand him. Someone actually realized Arzaga was in the wrong. At long last, things began to make sense in this confusing world Juan was living in. He felt as though he began to see a colorful ray of hope pierce the gloomy clouds of truth Juan was trying to accept.

"Thank you," Juan responded. "I really can't tell you about it, but thank you."

"Just remember the truth you know," Gabriel reminded him. "Arzaga does a good job at making us believe lies."

Gabriel's comment pierced Juan deeply. It had to be true. But how could it be true if Arzaga was teaching them how to live good, Christian lives? Juan felt conflicted because God

would not call someone to be a shepherd who was so resistant to truth.

"Oh, another piece of advice," Gabriel said, "don't confess anything to Arzaga. Well, anything big. He doesn't take his vow of confidentiality very seriously. I learned that one the hard way."

Juan looked at Gabriel with a degree of shock. "He broke confidentiality with your confession, too? Can I ask what happened?"

Gabriel began to laugh. "I helped out at a ceremony for one of the anitos several years back. Word got out about what happened. I thought if I confessed to Arzaga, I'd be safe. I confessed while people were in the chapel, and Arzaga berated me pretty openly. And was nearly shouting. It's like he wants others to hear our 'sins.'"

Gabriel's words were the confirmation Juan needed. Arzaga was disrespectful during confessions and was too loud. Juan was not the crazy one. Arzaga was truly in the wrong!

This account, however, was confusing to Juan, as well. He was happy to have someone relate to him about Arzaga not taking confidentiality seriously, but here he was speaking to someone he perceived to be a pagan. To Juan, after hearing

Gabriel's own confession, Gabriel seemed to be the type of man who paraded around as a Catholic in the sunlight and served the anitos of old in the shadows. It felt unfair to him that Gabriel could freely live such a double-standard life, just like Rolando did, but Gabriel was the first person he thought he could actually let his guard down with. It was as though Gabriel, to a little extent, understood.

"Thank you," Juan replied. "I guess you've heard the whispers. And you saw me not take the Eucharist. It's all been so humiliating."

"I don't know," Gabriel thought aloud. "From what I heard, you were just living your life. Arzaga didn't need to know any of that. He just loves hearing about sex."

Juan panicked. "What have you heard?" he frantically asked. "How bad are the rumors?"

"That you had sex with some woman in the town," Gabriel responded. "Conveniently, nobody can even identify who this woman might be! It's an incredibly stupid rumor, honestly. I don't get why Arzaga would publicly humiliate you with the Eucharist. You and I both know that people, married and unmarried, are breaking this so-called 'sixth commandment,' and it doesn't look like anybody else gets stopped from taking the

Eucharist. He must really hate you. And that pisses me off. Why attack you out of all people? You're one of the few harmless people who live here! And above all, you're honest! I don't know what actually happened, but you confessed your sins! Most people don't even do that here! Why punish the honest and humble? This man! What an idiot!"

Juan felt relieved and a little honored. It was just a stupid rumor going around about him. His reputation, with Gabriel and his sources at least, was safe for now. "I'm just glad that's the rumor going around," Juan gratefully said. "I thought people would think far worse."

"I honestly don't know what would qualify as a good confession for the sake of rumors," Gabriel responded. "Like, if you actually did anything really bad or hurtful to somebody, I would understand people being interested in the facts. The truth. But Juan Bautista Gubat doing something to harm someone else seriously? Okay, if the rumors are true, you had sex with someone. So? Did you rape her? Did you kill her? Did you ruin a marriage? No? Then stop worrying about it! Arzaga has no business prying into anybody's sexual life like that. And all the ridiculous questions he asks about sex! He's a voyeur!"

Gabriel was clearly agitated. He stopped himself, took a few deep breathes, turned to Juan and said, "I'm sorry. I get really worked up over that guy. I get worked up about most of the priests, honestly. Just don't confess to him again, please. Find another way to seek forgiveness from God, if you need to. Don't get it from that pervert."

Juan sat in a speechless stupor. Did Gabriel just defend him? Gabriel had no facts whatsoever and was a pagan. Yet he defended Juan from being socially abused by Arzaga. Juan knew he could only get absolution from an ordained priest or from martyrdom. He was not going to take Gabriel's advice, but he was touched that this acquaintance was ready to defend Juan's own honor.

"Speaking of Arzaga," Gabriel said, "He wants the town to meet him at the pavilion tomorrow morning. I know you're trying to hide from the world, but you should probably go."

* * *

Juan was grateful for Gabriel's words. Gabriel made him feel as though he could reconstruct the truth again, but his words did leave him with more questions than answers. Unable to sleep much, he spent the night trying to work through what he knew to be true. He knew Rolando was not innocent. He knew he said no

and physically resisted. He knew he was hurt. If the priests were right about God, then he knew that God was all-powerful and all-knowing.

These thoughts raced throughout his mind until dawn broke. Juan arose, ate, made his preparations, and headed to the pavilion near the town center with his mother. No one really knew what this meeting would be about, but they did not want to risk missing it, especially after what happened to Lawahin.

Once enough people had arrived, Arzaga began to speak. "My children, I bring you word from Manila. The king needs more galleons to be built to cross the oceans and to defend us from outside enemies. The governor is requesting that San Tadeo supply five adult men to assist in building these ships at the shipyard in Cavite."

The word 'Cavite' rang loud and ominous in the ears of the audience. Not much was known about what happened in Cavite. The people knew there was a shipyard there, that it was close to Manila, and that all men sent to Cavite worked under grueling conditions. No one from San Tadeo had been assigned to Cavite yet, but the rumors of its conditions spread quickly throughout the Tagalog towns. Cavite was to be avoided at all costs.

"This will be part of the public service tax," Arzaga continued. "Those men sent to Cavite will not have to perform other public service for the rest of the year, and their service will only be for forty days."

Whispers started to spread among the crowd. They feared such an assignment would be a death sentence.

Arzaga continued: "The following have been selected to work in Cavite and will be expected to report here at the pavilion five days from now to depart: Gabriel Tagulan, Elias Basi, Martin Luga, Francisco Marlangkoha, and Juan Bautista Gubat."

Chapter 18

Pagdarahitan

It is true that I cannot love or be happy in my own country, but I can suffer and die in it.

The five days raced by, and Juan found himself with the other four men at the pavilion ready to go to Cavite. Juan brought with him limited supplies in a small bag, but he truly had no idea what the experience would be like. The majority of his life was spent in San Tadeo, and he never once left the mountains and hills east of Manila. What should one bring to a shipyard? He continued to hear rumors that assignment to Cavite was a death sentence and that men never returned from the shipyards. The nights after the announcement, he would listen to his mother quietly suppress her sobs at the thought of losing her son.

The other four men he was traveling with were younger adults and came from poor backgrounds, all similar to Juan's. All

five of them were just farmers working to pay off debts to their debtors on land none of their families owned. None of them had ever touched the ocean, though they could see it miles away from their town during clear days. And certainly none knew how to build ships, especially ships of a Spanish design.

Father Arzaga and two Spanish musket men arrived and greeted the men at the pavilion. "We will escort you to Manila, and you will be taken to Cavite from there," he told the men. He then proceeded to march forward and beckoned his five victims to follow. The eight men made their way down the mountainside that San Tadeo rested on and headed towards the ocean. They travelled through the jungles on the mountainside that slowly thinned out to flat rice paddies the further west they went.

Hours later, they approached what the Tagalog men assumed to be Manila. Part of the city appeared to be demarcated by a stone wall surrounding the most extravagant buildings in the city. On the outside of the wall were thousands of stilted homes and busy communities that surrounded the whole walled portion of the city. There must have been tens of thousands of people living in the general area. Most of the houses and people were smashed up right outside the walled

portion of the city, but several houses dotted the rice paddies that encompassed the city.

All of the Tagalog men had never seen so many people concentrated in one place. They grew up in the mountains in small villages and in San Tadeo, which only had a few thousand people. Manila was a city. They watched as hundreds of people bustled through the streets with vendors at every corner. A few horse-drawn carriages caught their attention - something they had never seen before.

The people of the city seemed diverse, too. They recognized several Tagalogs throughout the city, but also saw Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese migrants. The five men selected for the shipyard had never seen Chinese or Japanese people before and were baffled by the diversity and number of people so close to their small town of San Tadeo. How did they not know that this different world was so close to them their whole lives?

Outside of the Spanish, the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Tagalogs, the men saw several people who looked as though they could be Tagalog, but had slightly different features. These people were their neighbors - the Kapampangans, the Cebuanos, the Hiligaynons, the Bikols, the Ilokanos, the

Ibanags, the Malays, the Sumatrans, the Ambonese, the Malukans, the Javanese, the Bruneians, and countless others. The Tagalogs significantly outnumbered their neighbors, but the globalized trade the Spanish had brought to Manila lured many neighbors to travel or to migrate there. Lastly, a group completely foreign to the men of San Tadeo were those brought over from the Americas - the Mexica, the Tlapanec, the Maya, the Quecha, among dozens of others lost to time.

"The walled city is Intramuros," Arzaga told the men, "and it is reserved for the Spanish. You cannot set foot there."

"Do any Spaniards live beyond the walls?" Gabriel asked.

"No. Just the Tagalogs and the Chinese," Arzaga said.

"The Chinese?" Gabriel asked again.

"Yes," Arzaga replied. "Ever since the Spanish took control of Manila, the Chinese have come here in the thousands to trade with us." He pointed to a large conglomeration of houses right outside the walls of Intramuros. "They mostly live over there in Parian." After proceeding forward a bit, Arzaga turned his head towards the five men being taken to Cavite and said, "Do stay away from the Chinese if you encounter any in Manila or

Cavite. They are a vile people set on damning all of you natives. We didn't kill enough of them in 1603..."

The group of men approached the walled portion of the city. They were brought to a gate with four Spaniards standing right outside the wall carrying muskets.

"These men will escort you and others to Cavite," Arzaga told his five men. "I shall see you in forty days. Godspeed." And with that, Arzaga entered the gates to the walled city with the two musket men who escorted the group and disappeared from their sights. Juan was relieved to know that Arzaga would not be breathing down his neck for the next forty days, even if the price he had to pay was the horrors of Cavite that he had heard.

Gabriel turned towards the four Spanish men and asked, "How many of us will there be?"

Three of the men ignored Gabriel altogether. One began to banter to Gabriel in Spanish.

"I don't think they speak Tagalog," Juan quietly noted.

"Does anyone here speak the foreigners' language?" Gabriel asked his four companions.

"The priests want us for our labor, not to help govern," one of the men responded. "They won't waste their time teaching

us a new language. That's reserved for the elites and their families. Like the Kulog family that can buy their way out of forced labor."

Gabriel looked back to the Spanish guards. He put his hands in the air and bowed a little. "Forgive me," he stated in Tagalog while trying to motion an apology of some sort.

"What are you doing?" another one of the Tagalogs from San Tadeo asked him.

"I don't know if I pissed them off," Gabriel said. "I know we'll be tortured in Cavite, but I don't want to make anybody angrier at us than they already are."

"A waste of time trying to pacify these brutes," the Tagalog responded.

The five men waited with the Spaniards for the next several hours. Slowly, they watched other European priests and soldiers bring small groups of men from different parts of the city and the paddies. Soon, their group ballooned to fifty Tagalogs and ten Spanish musket men. One of the musket men began speaking in poor Tagalog and ordered the people in butchered and unorganized words to follow him and the other Spaniards in a southward direction.

The group spent the next few hours traveling along the coast. The walled city disappeared from their sites, but they walked through several settlements along the coast. There was no shortage of towns between Manila and Cavite. The Tagalogs from the towns would stop their work on the streets or in the paddies and look woefully at the group of fifty Tagalogs as they marched to what had to have been Cavite. Finally, the group reached a shipyard. The yard was on a cape a few miles south of Manila. From the cape, the men could see the whole city of Manila pressed up against Manila Bay, a bay that disappeared into the sunset in the western sky.

"Alright, here we are," another one of the Spaniards told them in broken Tagalog. "Let me explain what you will be doing for the next few months."

"Wait, months?" Gabriel said to the group of men from San Tadeo. "Forty days is not even two months! Why are they saying *months*?"

The Spaniard continued: "For the next several days, you will be responsible for collecting wood and carving it down to planks." He gestured to a pile of planks that rested on the ground. "If you do your work, you will be fed. If you do not do your work, you will be lashed. We, the Spanish, are here to

protect you, but we are not going to protect you for free. You need to support us in our efforts to keep this colony afloat and safe from the foreign hands that want to conquer you."

Gabriel scoffed. "Foreign hands that want to conquer us? Like the Spanish?"

Juan elbowed Gabriel in his stomach. "What did you say earlier about pissing them off? Keep quiet!"

After giving this brief breakdown of expectations in Cavite, the Spaniard continued to explain the rules and roles of construction and the shipyard. Juan's mind drifted off as he gazed at the setting sun that was dipping into the ocean. He had never seen so much water before in his life, and he felt completely engulfed by it. Juan felt as though he could not escape the multiple hells that Arzaga and Rolando had heaped upon him.

Chapter 19

Alipin

See how ungrateful these Indios are! How can they be treated like human beings?

For the next several weeks, the men worked long hours, rising before sunrise and working past sunset. They started their days in complete darkness and were given watered-down rice soup as some sort of breakfast. The concoction was never filling, and the men would be dragged into the depths of the jungle as the sky barely started to light up. Once in the jungles, their tasks would vary day to day. Some days they would just fall trees. This activity would contribute to the acres of rainforest being destroyed to satisfy the blood and greed of the Spanish Empire. On other days, the men were expected to haul the fallen trees from the jungles to the shipyard. If the men were lucky, they would spend a few days assigned to the shipyard trimming the trees down into planks under the direction of Tagalog or Chinese

craftsmen from Manila. Their days would end well past sunset where they would return to their makeshift beds and eat rice with egg or fish, if they were lucky to have a light dinner that night.

No thought or consideration went into the paddies that the men of San Tadeo had left back home. Their families were an afterthought to the Spanish Empire. These men were expected to serve the crown and the Church. Nothing else mattered. The rumors were true - the work was grueling. Rigorous labor, unpaid, day in and day out. Barely any food. The only guaranteed meal was breakfast, if you could call it a meal. Many did not know if they would ever return home.

The shipyard was filled with hundreds of workers, the majority being of Tagalog ancestry. It was not uncommon to see a few of the workers fall ill with little hope of recovery. In sickness or in health, the men were expected to work. If they tried to rest, they would be lashed. Food portions were pathetic and insubstantial. Even the plumpest of men sent to Cavite slowly withered into near-emaciated workers after weeks of labor, limited food, and unrelenting illness.

The trees would be cut down with a two-person saw. Frequently, Gabriel would offer to work with Juan sawing down the trees together. For some unknown reason, Gabriel would

joke and act lightheartedly during this horrid task of slowly deforesting the jungle. He would laugh and talk about how grateful he was to be away from the priests, the Church, and some of the elite townspeople of San Tadeo.

Juan, whenever he could lift his head out of the misery of his situation, felt that Gabriel was intentionally trying to make him feel better about the slave-like conditions they were in. He would not give Gabriel's positive attitude much thought, let alone any deep thought, but it did catch his attention from time to time. Why was Gabriel so concerned about staying happy and optimistic? Juan did not know it, but it was a survival tactic of Gabriel's. Gabriel knew that he would only stay alive and energized if he kept his head above water. For some unknown reason, Gabriel latched onto Juan as his new best friend and did what he could to keep Juan alive, too.

On the days the men were expected to carry whole logs to the shipyard, they were forced to bring logs cut long to ensure planks and other parts of the ship were not too short. With the logs being so long, moving them was another two-person job, and Gabriel, ever eager, would always be the other man assisting Juan with hauling the timber. Just as it was with sawing down the trees, Gabriel maintained a positive attitude and tried

to brighten Juan's day with jokes and stories. But all attempts to save Juan from his melancholy were unfruitful. No matter what Gabriel did, Juan would wake up embittered, work begrudgingly, and fall asleep depressed.

On occasion, Gabriel's light-hearted attitude would upset the Spanish guards on and around the shipyard. They would storm up to Gabriel and start screaming at him in broken Tagalog or full Spanish, telling him to get back to work and to shut up. In one instance, a guard pulled out his whip and hit Gabriel on the face with it. The whip barely missed his eye, but blood began pouring out of the tear it left on Gabriel's face. Juan and Gabriel had no choice but to keep working. Once the guard was out of sight, Juan tended to Gabriel's wound on his face and covered it with some makeshift ointment he created from the limited vegetation within their reach. Juan would never tell Gabriel this, but it was a simple recipe he had learned from Lawahin. No one could know where Juan learned it from – not from her.

Juan carefully applied the ointment to Gabriel's face, patiently allowing Gabriel to wince at the stinging sensation of the ointment against his broken flesh. Gabriel, with an awkward and uneven ointment burning the cut on his cheek, put his hand

on Juan's shoulder and said, "I don't know how I would still be alive without you." Gabriel smiled and tried to look Juan directly in the eyes, but Juan glanced at the ground. The gratitude, the cheerfulness, and the sheer kindness could not raise Juan out of the bottomless pit of his religious torment.

Gabriel's smile faded from his face when he saw Juan's bitter reaction. He grabbed both of Juan's shoulders and said, "I know this is horrible, Juan. And I don't know if I can make this any better for you. Just know I'm really happy you're here with me. You've always been so good to me, and I hope you'll be able to see that once we are fed and not working all hours of the day." Juan glanced up at Gabriel, still frowning, and tried to smooth out the ointment on his face. He then patted Gabriel on his waist, broke Gabriel's hands off of his shoulder, and walked back to work.

Juan spent most of this time thinking about how he somehow deserved this. He felt that, somehow, maybe this labor would help him become contrite. This was his atonement, like an elongated period of self-flagellation. Perhaps this entire experience would save him from hell. But all these thoughts did not account for Juan knowing what Rolando did, nor his ability to escape this backbreaking torture he and the other Tagalog

laborers had to endure. If Juan had to pay for forgiveness in the shipyard, Rolando should have paid the same price. In labor, not money. In blood, not status.

As time marched on in the shipyard, rage began to build up in Juan towards Arzaga. Who was this man who claimed to be a servant of God and so flippantly abused his power and authority? Why did this hypocrite refuse to honor the confidentiality of confession? Juan went to this man in a time of need, and the man damned Juan both physically in Cavite and spiritually within the walls of the church. The gall this man had to protect Rolando, even after a crime was reported. Was justice only for the elite? Could the poor not inherit the kingdom of heaven?

Juan thought back to his bath with Gabriel days before they were sent away from town. Arzaga almost acted as if he were more important than God. This man relegated his own deity to a side character. Arzaga was the greatest of all the anitos, not God. Everything he did was correct and just, and God sanctioned all of his actions. What a vile and inflammatory truth. Juan would begin to see blood and envision a brutal death fall upon Arzaga and Rolando, a death worse than the death Juan was slowly experiencing. He could not help these thoughts. Juan

was bitterly angry and spiritually wounded, and the Church did not teach him how to channel this anger in any way. Only priests and those in power could use anger, as Christ did in the temple. Anger was not an emotion afforded to the oppressed.

Such rage also filled Juan with guilt. Was he no better than Arzaga feeling so violently and hatefully about him? Why would he think and feel so poorly towards a servant of God? God's ways are higher than man's ways. Did Juan not trust in God? God would certainly not call someone to the role of a shepherd if his goal was to chase the sheep away. Perhaps it was Juan who was running from God, and not Arzaga who was chasing Juan away from God. Juan's greatest fears would materialize during such emotional conflicts. Surely, Juan deserved to suffer both in life and death. What a wretched man he was! He deserved to die in this brutal shipyard!

* * *

After forty days, the men from San Tadeo went to the Spanish authorities in Cavite and asked about going home. "There is a labor shortage," an official told them. "We need you to stay longer and work."

"You're going to keep us here longer?" one of the men from San Tadeo blurted out.

"What the hell is wrong with you people?" Gabriel shouted at the authorities. "We worked forty days with little food and sleep. Half of the shipyard is contaminated with illness. We have carved hundreds... thousands of planks for you! We destroyed half of the jungle for your ships! What more do you want? Let us go home!"

The Spanish authority responded by backhanding Gabriel on his face with all the force the man could muster. "Most of us Spanish nearly died on our way here from our homelands! Hunger, sickness, and shipwrecks - all of us Spaniards experienced it! Not to mention the families we eternally abandoned back in Spain! You still have a glimmer of hope of seeing yours!" The Spaniard itched his nose, sniffled, and spat on the ground. "We came here to protect you and your people. We are even saving you from the eternal pits of hell, from the brutalization of the Chinese, the Japanese, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Moros, and the English, and this is how you thank us? Complaining and demanding we serve you for free? Without us, every other kingdom on this planet would have slaughtered you for your gold and wood! You savages would have all slaughtered each other without us with your satanic ceremonies, head hunting, cannibalism, and sodomy! All

we ask is that you give a little back to us, and you complain when you have barely approached the level of suffering we have faced? You lazy, idle monkeys!" He slapped Gabriel again, somehow with more force than he had before.

Gabriel stood there holding his face while doing everything in his power from lunging at the Spaniard and attacking him back. His eyes were lit with the fire of fury, but he kept his mouth shut and his hands to himself.

"We are sorry, sir," Juan interjected for his peers. "We didn't know how much you have suffered yourself. Please, sir, we will get back to work. Please, don't hit my friend again. I will make sure he doesn't complain again." Juan put both of his hands on Gabriel's shoulders and began gently guiding Gabriel back to the jungle where they were working. As the five men from San Tadeo backed away, Gabriel continued to glare at the Spaniard.

The authority responded by spitting in Juan's direction. "Get back to work, you filthy animals!" the authority barked. "Don't you dare complain to me ever again! You don't know what suffering is, you disgusting apes!"

All motivation to keep on working drained from Juan's soul. He suffered enough for his sins. Hell itself could not be as

horrific as this shipyard was. Surely, he was ready to go back home and work the lands of the Church to pay off the debts he and his family owed. Slaving away at the shipyard only to return to San Tadeo to a life in debt to the Church and at the mercy of those in power. Was his life not hell enough? He already had so little control over his life in San Tadeo. Why extend that lack of power to Cavite?

After the forty days of absence, the men did not return to San Tadeo. The people of the town quietly assumed the five men had died. Even Arzaga himself wondered what happened to the men he had sent to Cavite. However, Arzaga was relieved. He no longer had to worry about Juan and the 'temptations' he posed to the 'good' men of San Tadeo. "Now I don't have to worry about false accusations against you ever again," he told Rolando one day in passing. "Truly the Lord smiles upon you and is protecting you."

Chapter 20

Kalis

To suffer...to work...What God is This?

During one particularly grueling day at Cavite, Juan and Gabriel were hauling wood to the shipyard from the jungle. As they laid the wood down at the shipyard, they noticed a ship on the water out on the horizon. This was nothing particularly new to them - several Spanish and Chinese ships frequented the port at Manila. The two men continued back to the jungle to collect more wood.

After hauling the second batch of lumber to the shipyard, they discovered more ships on the horizon. They saw that the first ship was much closer to the coast at Cavite. Juan noted that everyone at the shipyard was watching this ship. Even the Spanish stopped threatening and beating the workers so they could see what was happening. It was like no other ship Juan

nor Gabriel had ever seen. Juan pointed this out to Gabriel, who began to notice the oddness of the situation.

"This can't be good," one man standing next to Juan and Gabriel remarked. "The Moros from the southern islands are known to attack Christian settlements."

"What do you mean by attack?" Gabriel asked. "Isn't it good if they are attacking these brutes?"

The man shook his head. "They attack the foreigners and kidnap the Tagalogs and other natives. They've been doing these slave raids for centuries, but everything has been getting worse since the Spanish came. The Spanish have been fighting them for decades, and now the Moros are forced to fight back. They attack our island more often now, but they still take slaves with them after every raid."

"What do they do with the kidnapped?" Gabriel asked.

"They take them back to their homelands and sell them off as slaves," he answered gravely. "In incredibly rare situations, they will kill them, especially in important ceremonies."

They watched the first ship approach the shore, and several men disembarked the ship and started to wade through the seawater towards the coast. They were dressed similarly to

the Tagalog traders of old, but Juan noticed that all of them were wearing sheathes around their waists.

The Spanish soldiers managing the shipyard went to the shore to investigate the situation. The managers assumed the sailors were misguided. It was not the first time that traders from the south tried to enter Manila through Cavite. The Spanish began wading through the water, trying to get closer to these visitors. As the Spanish approached, the sailors started pulling kalises from their sheaths. The kalises were the local variety of double-edged swords forged in insular Southeast Asia with a long blade that was wavy towards the handle but straight towards the tip. To the horror of those watching, the sailors stabbed the Spaniards repeatedly with these kalises until they limped lifelessly into the shallow waters.

Gunfire was heard in the direction of the ship, and dozens of men poured out of the ship and headed towards shore. The Tagalog and Chinese workers of the shipyard began to run inland towards the jungle. Juan did not follow suit. He stood frozen in shock. Unbeknownst to him, Juan's defense mechanism was to freeze. It kept him alive when Rolando assaulted him. Surely it would keep him alive as these raiders attacked and inched closer to him. In his mind that was being

hijacked by his amygdala, it was better to be a slave than to be dead.

Juan watched as the raiders began killing indiscriminately, both locals and foreigners. Many of them started gathering whatever men they could catch to take them back to their ships. The only people at Cavite that were armed were the Spanish, and they were quickly overwhelmed by the raiders. As the raiders continued to slaughter the Spanish, they would take whatever muskets and weapons they could rummage from the dying bodies. The Tagalog and Chinese workers were not allowed to have weapons due to fears of revolts. The workers were left defenseless and could only run away from the raiders.

Gabriel followed the fleeing men and began running inland. However, he stopped when he noticed Juan was not moving.

"Juan!" Gabriel shouted running back to Juan. "What are you doing? Juan!"

Juan felt a hand grab his shoulder and start dragging him away from the shipyard. It was Gabriel. "Now is our only chance. We need to leave now!"

Something inside Juan told him to follow Gabriel. Gabriel was a good man, and he went out of his way to help Juan out of

his state of shock. Even if Gabriel was not a faithful Catholic, he still saved Juan. Maybe this was God's way of saving Juan?

Gabriel and Juan ran together into the jungle with the other men and continued fleeing further inland. As they ran, they slowly separated from the fleeing men who surrounded them. Soon, they found themselves alone in the middle of a dense jungle with no road or settlement in sight. Gabriel and Juan had survived, but they now found themselves lost.

"What do we do now?" Juan asked. "Go back to Manila?"

"Absolutely not," Gabriel responded. "We did our time at Cavite. We did more than our time! If we go back to Manila, they will either punish us or send us back to Cavite. We need to get as far away from Cavite as possible."

"So, we can return to San Tadeo," Juan suggested.

"I don't know," Gabriel replied. "Arzaga might just send us back to Cavite or have us punished." Gabriel rested for a moment until his panting returned to regular breaths. "We need to keep traveling. We don't know how bad the raid was or if they're going to follow us. We can't stop here."

The two began to head southeast. "We're going in the opposite direction of San Tadeo," Juan told Gabriel.

"San Tadeo cannot be the goal right now," Gabriel responded. "It will risk us getting too close to Cavite. We have to find safety first, get some sort of information, and then we can talk about San Tadeo."

"But what about our families?" Juan asked. "Don't they need us?"

Gabriel sighed. "Even if we are able to get back to San Tadeo, they might just throw us back at Cavite. We wouldn't be able to stay with our families. Is it even worth the risk?"

"I don't... I don't know," Juan stammered.

The two ventured deeper and deeper into the jungle and into the mountains that flanked the interior of the island, avoiding the coastline. In truth, Gabriel did not know where he was taking them, but he wanted to be as far away from Cavite and San Tadeo as possible. While Cavite was worse, they essentially lived a life of servitude at San Tadeo. What kind of life did they have there, anyway? Was it worth going back to San Tadeo to see their families if they would be forced to labor day in and day out for the Spanish priests?

As the two wandered, the realization that they had almost died settled in Juan's mind. He began thinking about death and what lay beyond this life. He could have been sent to

hell that day. Juan thought of returning to San Tadeo to confess his sins, something he needed to do if he was to be saved in heaven. If placating Arzaga was what he needed to do to be saved, surely it would be worth it. But then, like Gabriel, he wondered if there was more to life than laboring under the thumb of the Spanish. Clearly, Arzaga was abusing his power and eating off of Juan's labor. What difference would it make to Juan if he labored under the pirates rather than under the Church?

"Maybe life would have been better as a slave to the raiders," Juan thought out loud. "Were we not slaves under the Spanish at Cavite? At San Tadeo? Laboring day in and day out with little food and no hope of returning home? Did we miss our true chance at freedom?"

"The Spanish have not killed us yet," Gabriel replied. "Do you not remember the old days when datu would be buried with their slaves? Before San Tadeo, we killed slaves. There's no doubt that they kill their slaves, too. That's what you do with slaves. If we allowed ourselves to get caught, we risked being killed as slaves."

"The same oppression under a different ruler," Juan replied. After taking some time to think, Juan responded, "But the Spanish can get us into heaven."

"Are you sure you want to go to their heaven?" Gabriel asked.

Juan thought deeply about that question. What would Catholic heaven be like? If men like Arzaga stood at the gate between heaven and earth, could it truly be such a good place? Anything had to be better than San Tadeo and Cavite. Anything had to be better than this life. We suffer in this life to rest in the next.

Death started to feel like a relief to Juan. He spent the last several weeks being tortured by the Spanish public labor tax. With death, he could finally rest not only from the labor of Spanish oppression, but from the internal turmoil he felt from being raped, from being publicly shamed, and most of all, from being damned. It would all finally end. His predestined future – a life in hell – would at last come, and he could accept his eternal fate without the façade of human agency. In hell, at least he could rest from the bitter lie that he was able to enter heaven.

Chapter 21

Saubat

Come with me and we will live together like brothers.

Gabriel and Juan stayed in the jungle for several days. They ultimately came to the realization that going back to Cavite would undoubtedly result in punishment because they had abandoned their assignment. Such was the logic of the Spanish who did not value the lives and autonomy of the Tagalogs. Despite this, Cavite was not hard to find, and they could have easily returned after fleeing the raid. Even in their current location, lost in the mountainous jungle, they could head west to the ocean to find their way back to Cavite and return to their assignment. There was no doubt that, if they returned to any Spanish settlement, the priests or the Spanish would ask why they did not return to Cavite after the raid.

They continued to wander in the jungle, hoping to find some way out of it. The jungle covered a range of mountains that

continually peaked and dipped throughout the dense vegetation. The two trudged up and down these mountains as they made their way through the jungle. Juan silently wanted to find a Christianized town. Perhaps he could confess to a priest there. Gabriel, the one who was guiding the two men, was secretly hoping to run into a village that had not yet fallen to the Spanish. They both sought civilization, but their definitions of it conflicted.

Fortunately, Gabriel and Juan were both talented in particular ways. Gabriel knew how to fish as he frequently fished in the streams around San Tadeo, so the two were able to subsist off of whatever freshwater fish Gabriel was able to catch in the various streams and rivers. Though not a complete meal, it was more food than they were allotted at Cavite. Juan knew how to weave - a feminine skill that Marta taught him when he was younger. The weaving allowed him to make mats for the two to sleep on and bags to carry supplies in. They were hastily made, usually by the light of fire in the night when the two stopped wandering the jungle, but they served their purpose and helped keep the two alive.

Another skill Juan brought to the table was foraging. Though not an expert, he learned from Lawahin and Marta how to identify particular plants that could be used for medicine or

food. There was no rice for the two men to eat, but they were able to regain the nutrition that they had lost in their service in Cavite.

As they spent more time together keeping each other alive, the two began to appreciate each other more and more. Gabriel was always very kind to Juan, and Juan began to appreciate this 'undeserved' kindness. Juan started to let his guard down with Gabriel, whom he considered a pagan and a pseudo-Catholic. Despite their religious differences, Juan realized that Gabriel was a safe man. To Juan, Gabriel was now becoming... important.

The jungle had brought the two men together in a way neither had thought possible. They had to rely on each other and only each other to survive. They spent many days and nights talking about their lives, their hopes, their fears, and their dreams.

"I hope one day to be able to serve in the Church," Juan told Gabriel, "like we used to do as kids when we helped the elderly to go to catechisms. I want to participate in a confraternity like my mother. Farming just gets in the way of most of the service and projects the men's confraternity regularly does. It's

really only built for those who do not farm, but maybe someday I can become part of it."

"I cannot stand the Church," Gabriel would reply. "They claim to teach about free will and made such a big fuss about us 'choosing' to receive the sacraments, but what other choice did we have? They are an organization of hypocrisy."

Though their opinions differed almost entirely, they still respected each other and bonded over their differences. They physically needed each other in the jungle to feed and look out for one another. Still, they slowly started to need each other emotionally in their lonely solitude.

"I wonder if I will ever make it to heaven," Juan once confessed. "I can't help but wonder if it's even possible for a poor man like me to get into heaven."

"I feel like the afterlives of the old religion are more reasonable than this Christian heaven," Gabriel would respond. "I mean, an afterlife for sailors, an afterlife for warriors, and an afterlife for everyone else. It makes so much more sense than heaven and hell. It feels like hell is conveniently just for those who disobey the priests."

"But heaven is for everyone," Juan said.

"Heaven is for the Spanish," Gabriel responded. "In their logic, we will all go to purgatory to pay for our sins." Gabriel sighed. "If I were born a few generations earlier, I could have been a warrior and taken my place in their afterlife. Instead, I am stuck pleasing a God I don't understand and a God that doesn't understand me."

Juan took in Gabriel's words. "I think I'm destined for hell," he said with his facial expression twisting into one of hopelessness.

Gabriel put his hand on Juan's shoulder. "No one like you deserves hell, Juan. And if hell is where you ultimately go to, I will be happy spending an eternity there with you."

Juan did not know what to say. He just put his head on Gabriel's shoulder. Without saying another word, Gabriel put his hand on Juan's head and began gently scratching his hair.

* * *

A few days after fleeing Cavite, the two approached what appeared to be a town in the distance. They could see stilted homes and farmland through the thinning jungle brush. "Don't go out there yet," Gabriel told Juan while pulling him back. "We need to make sure this town is safe."

The two peered into the distance and saw a cluster of buildings around a central point. "The order of the houses doesn't look promising," Gabriel said, noting how the Spanish laid out their towns. "I think those are rice paddies, too, not dry farms."

Juan caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a steeple. "A church!" he declared, pointing in its direction.

Gabriel verified that it was, indeed, a church. "We can't go there."

"Of course we can," Juan responded. "They'll take us in!"

"They'll ask where we are from and how we got here," Gabriel stated. "We don't know how close we are to Cavite. They might accuse us of being deserters. They might send us straight back to Cavite. They might lash us. Starve us. Execute us! We don't know what they will do. We can't risk it, Juan!"

"We can't risk spending the rest of our lives hiding in the jungle, either," Juan retorted.

"We have been eating better in the jungle than we were eating at Cavite," Gabriel reminded Juan. "Who knows how long they wanted us to stay in Cavite for. For all we know, they may have made us board the ships we were building and die at sea."

We will live infinitely longer in the jungle than risking it all for a Spanish town."

Juan was disappointed, but he knew he could not change Gabriel's mind. Being the good man he was, he was not going to abandon Gabriel in the jungle to fend for himself and go to the Spanish town for a shot at salvation. But he knew there was a church there, which meant there was a priest there who was not Arzaga. Perhaps a kinder priest who would understand the soul-crushing torture Juan had undergone. Was that his only chance at absolution? Did he just miss an opportunity at redemption?

The two returned to the jungle and began heading east - away from San Tadeo, away from Cavite, and away from the town they had just encountered.

* * *

One night, as the two were sitting next to a small fire that Juan had built, Gabriel got brave and asked Juan, "For someone who loves the Church so much, you stopped taking the Eucharist. I really don't want to pressure you to tell me anything, Juan, but I also know you can't just bottle all of that anguish up forever. Juan, what happened?"

Juan was nervous about this question, but Gabriel had shown respect for Juan regardless of his beliefs or feelings.

"Please, just believe me," Juan responded.

"Why would I not believe you?" Gabriel asked.

"Father Arzaga did not believe me," Juan replied.

"Forget him, Juan," Gabriel responded. "Arzaga is a bastard, anyway!"

Juan let out a sigh and then began. "Rolando Kulog invited me over to drink with him. At the time, I thought it was the invitation of a lifetime. He was a servant of the Church, he worked closely with the priests, and he was learning Latin. He was a friend that I had always wanted. San Tadeo is full of so many people who don't care about the Church. It felt like the only people in my life that truly cared were my mother and I. Rolando was the one shot I had at making a friend, perhaps a close friend, with someone who served the Church just as diligently as my mother. So, there was no way that I would deny Rolando's invitation to drink."

Juan paused and took in a deep breath. "As we drank, he started to get really drunk. He began crying about the pressures he was facing from his family and how he was the oldest and needed to take care of everyone else."

He took another deep breath. "I hugged him. He needed it. And, honestly, I think I needed it, too." A tear rolled down his cheek. "He hugged me back, and I really needed that hug. I just needed to know that I meant something to him – to any man so close to the Church."

He stopped. "I don't know if I can go on."

"What did Rolando do?" Gabriel asked. Gabriel did not realize it, but the question he asked emboldened Juan. It did not place blame on Juan in any way. The question only focused on what Rolando did wrong - something that Juan knew was true, even if it was easier for Juan to blame himself.

Juan fidgeted with his hands in silence for several minutes. Gabriel patiently looked at Juan without saying a word as Juan gathered the courage to speak the truth again. "He raped me," Juan whispered.

Both of them sat there in silence. After some time, Gabriel stood up, lifted Juan up, and hugged him. Juan hugged him back and began to cry silently.

"You treated him with respect, and he took advantage of you," Gabriel whispered to Juan. "I'm so sorry, Juan. You did not deserve that. Not at all."

Juan tightened his hug with Gabriel. For once in a long time, Juan felt safe. He felt validated and did not have to defend himself. Juan did not have to overexplain how he did not fight back hard enough or if he secretly wanted it. He was just heard and held.

"Everything kind of makes sense now," Gabriel began saying. "You have been so miserable for the longest time, well before Cavite. If I had known, I would've done more while we were back at San Tadeo. I'm sorry I didn't see the signs." Gabriel's voice began to quiver as tears ran down his face. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

Juan took in all the healing he could from the moment. He knew this hug would not devolve into something awful like the hug he gave Rolando. At long last, he was with someone who believed him and someone who did not want to hurt him. He was safe.

Gabriel spoke again, "You needed a friend who shared the same beliefs as you. You just wanted to be faithful. I don't think God could be mad at you for trying to do the right thing, Juan." Gabriel felt Juan begin to tremble as his crying intensified. Juan buried his face into Gabriel's shoulder, and Gabriel

responded by tightening his hug and putting his face on Juan's shoulder.

The two stood silently hugging each other, refusing to let one another go. All of the outside world, the noises from the jungle, the ringing from the insects, the croakings from the frogs, the cracking of the fire, dissipated as the two stood there holding each other.

After a long while, the embrace finished. The two sat down on their mats. "Do you want to talk more about it?" Gabriel asked. "You don't have to if you don't want to. I just want to help however I can."

Juan smiled slightly and put his hand on Gabriel's knee. "Maybe another day. But thank you."

"It's a good thing I'm far away from Rolando," Gabriel said, putting his arm around Juan's shoulder. "I will kill him if I see him again." Juan rested his head on Gabriel's shoulder, stared at the fire, and smiled.

* * *

The next day, the two of them wandered in the jungle. Juan caught sight of a thinning tree line and alerted Gabriel. They followed the tree thinning until they found themselves next to a dry rice field nestled in a valley between two mountains.

"I think this is a village with no priest," Gabriel said, noting that he could not see a steeple. Emboldened by his theory, Gabriel began walking towards the center of the village. Juan followed.

They saw houses scattered around the rice fields. After going deeper into the village, they approached what appeared to be a town center, but there was no plaza or church. All there was were a number of small houses and one large house - the house of a datu.

"I think this is an untouched village," Gabriel said. It was known that many people stayed away and isolated from the Spanish to keep their autonomy. He just did not think he would ever make it to one in his lifetime.

As they approached the village, Tagalog men began climbing out of the houses with bolos and bamboo spears. The men surrounded Juan and Gabriel, tied their hands up, and forced them into an empty farmhouse at the edge of the village.

Chapter 22

Bathala

If I believed in miracles, I would not believe in God: I would believe in a man deified; I would believe that man created God in his image and likeness.

Once they were forced into the empty farmhouse, Juan and Gabriel were sat on the floor, and the ropes that bound their hands were fed outside one of the farmhouse's windows to the foundational poles at the base of the house.

"Isn't this what you wanted to escape?" Juan asked Gabriel ironically.

"Be patient with them," Gabriel responded. "They have to protect themselves. The world is not a safe place for any of us. They're doing nothing wrong."

It struck Juan that Gabriel, who had no faith in San Tadeo, had faith in this village. Gabriel had no issue being taken captive, as long as his captors were Tagalog. Juan could not

understand the faith and trust Gabriel had in these un-Christianized people. The two of them did not even know who they were!

A Tagalog man adorned in gold jewelry soon entered the house with another armed Tagalog man and began speaking to the two captives.

"Show me your teeth," he immediately demanded upon entering the house. The command confused both Gabriel and Juan.

"Show me your teeth!" the man repeated. Gabriel and Juan complied and showed him their teeth.

"See," the man said to the armed man, pointing to their teeth. "They are white, like the foreigners." Before colonization, the Tagalogs and other people in the Philippines and Southeast Asia would permanently blacken their teeth with a lacquer to prevent tooth decay. The Spanish, for whatever grandiose reason, ended the practice and deemed it a form of barbarism.

"Where did you two come from?" the man adorned in gold asked.

"Cavite," Gabriel responded. "We escaped a raid." He had complete trust in these people and felt no need to withhold information.

"You've lived among the foreigners," the man stated.

"Yes," Gabriel said, "but we had no..."

"Do you work for them?" the man interrupted.

"Against our will, yes!" Gabriel cried.

"Work for them as what?" the man asked.

"Slaves!" Gabriel shouted. "We were enslaved under them with no hope of freedom!"

"And you expect us to redeem you?" the man asked.

"Any captivity is better than captivity under the foreigners," Gabriel stated.

The man looked over to Juan. "Why is the other one not talking?" the man asked, pointing to Juan.

Gabriel nudged Juan with his elbow. Juan, who was staring at the floor, looked up at Gabriel and then at the man. "Everything he says is the truth," he quietly confirmed. "We were essentially slaves. We had no choice in our labor, and we've spent our lives working for the foreigners."

The man looked at the two of them. "Are others following you?"

"No," Gabriel responded. "We've been lost in the jungle for days. No one could have followed us."

"Are you planning to tell the foreigners about us?"

"No," Gabriel answered. "Sir, we don't even know where we are. We fled Cavite and refused to go back because of the attack. We got as far away as we could from Cavite. We are not here to hurt you. Sir, we want to stay with you!"

Juan looked over at Gabriel. Juan did not want to stay in this village. Juan wanted to go back to a priest and confess.

The man groaned. "We need to speak to the datu about this," the man told the two. "If you two try to escape, we will kill you." He turned towards the exit. "I'll be back." He then left the house with the armed man.

As they were leaving, Juan stated, "So, we are going to stay here?"

Gabriel responded, "We may not have a choice."

Once the villagers were out of earshot, Juan asked, "Can we really trust them? What if they try to kill us?"

"They're rightfully paranoid about the Spanish," Gabriel responded. "Did you notice that all of the questions were about us and our connections to the Spanish?"

"Gabriel, will they kill us?" Juan asked again.

"I don't know," Gabriel said. "They could try to enslave us. They could sacrifice us. They could let us go. I don't know

what they will do. But I think we have better odds with them than with the Spanish."

Juan sat in silence for a bit, then spoke. "So this is it? We narrowly escaped death and enslavement at Cavite after months of brutal labor, just to be killed or enslaved by another group of Tagalogs? We finally get out of the clutches of Arzaga and end up in the hands of another tyrant?"

"We don't know what is going to happen yet," Gabriel tried to reassure Juan. "Have faith! They can't be as bad as the Spanish!"

"What does God want from me?" Juan questioned.
"What does God want from both of us? Why does he hate us?"

"What do you want from God?" Gabriel responded. "Why do you love God?"

Juan sat for a minute thinking about that question.

"I want forgiveness," he quietly said.

"Forgiveness from what sin?" Gabriel responded.

"From what I did with Rolando," Juan said.

"From what Rolando did to you?" Gabriel asked. "You need forgiveness for being attacked, violated, and used as a mere object of pleasure? You did nothing wrong! He hurt you. The sins and crimes are all on him! All you did was hug him!"

He's the one that needs to be forgiven, not you. He deserves torture and death, not you!" Gabriel kicked his foot against the flooring of the house. "That pig deserves pain and suffering for abusing his power. That man is no less of a tyrant than Arzaga is!"

"But God wants to punish me," Juan started. "He publicly shamed me through Arzaga, sent me to Cavite, nearly had me killed while at Cavite, and now here we are. Tied up in some unknown village and lost in the middle of the jungle. Clearly God wants me to suffer for all the evil I have done." He looked towards the heavens, "Please forgive me, God!"

"Then God wants me to suffer, too," Gabriel retorted. "Rolando didn't attack me like he attacked you, but I was publicly shamed. I suffered at Cavite. I almost died, too."

This hushed Juan and made him reconsider everything he said. Why would God want to do these horrible things to Gabriel? Gabriel most certainly was not perfect, but he was a good man. He deserved nothing that happened to him. Could God truly be that unmerciful?

After thinking about Gabriel for a bit, Juan turned to him, "Arzaga sent me to Cavite because of what happened with

Rolando. Why do you think Arzaga chose you to come to Cavite?"

Gabriel chuckled shyly. "I've always been snarky with him and asked too many questions. Assisting with the anito a few years back also didn't help my public image. He just doesn't like me. To be fair, I don't like him, either."

Juan silently agreed with him. Gabriel, though kind, was very blunt with people. He had been blunt with Juan for the past several days in the jungle. Strange enough, it was one of Gabriel's better qualities.

The two sat in silence for a bit. The quiet soon grew to dread since neither of them knew what their fate would be. Juan began saying the Lord's Prayer, begging for deliverance. Gabriel listened, but did not join. His faith was more in the traditions of old, not this new foreign religion that only brought him pain and shame.

Juan's prayers were interrupted when a dove landed on the lower part of one of the window frames of the house. He stared at the bird in awe, knowing it was a good omen. Juan pointed out the dove to Gabriel. "Look! A dove! Maybe this is God's sign of deliverance."

Gabriel nodded, "Sure," thinking little of the situation.

"It's the symbol of the Holy Spirit," Juan continued, "like the dove at Jesus's baptism. When Juan Bautista baptized him." Juan paused for a second. "Juan Bautista, my namesake."

In the distance, the two could hear multiple men's voices sound from the silence. The voices slowly grew as they got closer to the house. The dove flew away, and a fairy bluebird landed on the window frame. This caught Gabriel's attention since he took the old Tagalog traditions more seriously than the Catholic traditions. The fairy bluebird was seen as a sign from Bathala, the most powerful anito of the old Tagalog religion and the first creator.

The fairy bluebird quickly flew away in the direction from which the voices were coming. After the bird left, Gabriel and Juan heard the voices outside hush for a moment. The voices continued after a while in awe and fear. The two could then clearly hear the conversation outside the house.

"It is a bad omen!" one of the voices proclaimed.

"But what if they are with the foreigners? We can't just release them!" another asked.

"Why would Bathala send the omen then if we are supposed to release them?"

"If Bathala wanted us to proceed, the bird would have flown in the other direction. Bathala does not want us to proceed, and we need to listen!"

"How can we trust them? They're slaves!"

"We can make them our slaves, now."

"No! We mustn't! Bathala made it clear, we cannot hurt these men!"

The group of men continued to argue as they approached the farmhouse. "See?" Gabriel stated. "We are going to be fine!"

When the men entered the farmhouse, they saw the two captives silently looking up at them, their expressions mixed with hope and fear. "Bathala was right," one of the men said to the others. "We cannot harm these men!"

The man adorned with gold entered the house. "Bathala sent us a bluebird, and it flew to the left. We cannot harm you." He signaled one of the arm men to cut the ropes and free the men. Juan and Gabriel wrestled their ropes off of their arms as they stood up. Juan was confused as to how this omen could be so significant. He looked over to Gabriel to maybe get some form of insight and saw Gabriel smiling and holding back tears.

"Bathala has spoken, and we must listen," the man adorned in gold told them. "We welcome you two to Gatnabundok."

Chapter 23

Datu

I have decided to leave the province where I was living to go north and dwell among the independent tribes of infidels.

The two were escorted to the center of the village by the man adorned with gold, who introduced himself as Ama ni Hanginin, though he went by Manihangin. Manihangin summoned the datu, and Gabriel and Juan were introduced to the village leader and his wife.

"Thank you for coming to Gatnabundok," the datu said. "We ask that you stay here with us. We have had a few people from the lowlands come here and make a life away from the foreigners. They have been precious additions to our village, and we are sure you two will be, as well, by the sign of Bathala."

Gabriel was enthralled with the idea, but Juan, after seeing what he thought was a miracle from God that saved his life, was left feeling uncertain. He was relieved that they were

alive and free, but he also knew that God would not be among these mountain dwellers who actively refused the authority of the Spanish. Juan would be unable to find absolution isolated in this mountain village.

"We can assist you in building a house," the datu continued, "and you two can work my land - even expand it a little bit. You can pay your debt back over time."

There it was, Juan thought. Instead of repaying his family's debt in San Tadeo, he would take on a new debt and pay it off here in the mountains to a different master.

"We appreciate your generous offer, Datu," Gabriel responded as Juan overthought the whole scenario.

"Please," the datu continued, "we beg that you do not leave to go back to the lowlands. You will be safe and free here, away from the foreigners who forced you to work."

"Thank you," Gabriel replied. "I would love to stay here." This was an honest answer. Gabriel had grown overwhelmed and burdened by the Spanish rule. What laid before him was an opportunity to live a free life away from the Spanish, their government, and their church. Yes, he would be indebted to someone else, but indebted to people who saved him and Juan.

The two were fed in the house of the datu. It had been the first time in weeks that the two had had a proper meal - rice, cooked vegetables, small cuts of fish. The Spaniards at Cavite barely gave any rice to the two, and stopped giving rice out altogether after several weeks. The two of them were eating better lost in the jungles than they were at Cavite, but they were both grateful to eat a full meal after months of torture.

One of the datu's servants showed the two a place where they could bathe. While bathing, Juan and Gabriel were finally able to discuss their next steps.

"Juan," Gabriel started, "that bluebird saved our lives!" Gabriel was excited. "This is our chance to live a new life away from the Spanish. We will be free!"

"But what about our families?" Juan asked. "What about the lives we built in San Tadeo?"

"We will be punished for abandoning our assignment if we go back to San Tadeo," Gabriel responded. "We cannot safely go back. They might send us back to Cavite to die."

"What will the punishment be?" Juan asked. "If the punishment is light, it will be worth it to be with our families."

"Do you want to go back because of God?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes!" Juan replied. "He saved us. The dove was there, the sign of the Holy Spirit. God was there with us."

"Juan," Gabriel started, "you know Arzaga. That man is bitter and vengeful. He will punish us severely for leaving Cavite. Especially if the other three went back to San Tadeo and told them that we fled."

"But what if the other three got kidnapped or killed?" Juan asked.

"That really doesn't make it any better, Juan! You saw what he did to Lawahin. She was trying to save your sister and your niece from the death of a Catholic birth, and Lawahin was helping. What was Lawahin's reward?"

"Only the priests can absolve me of my sins and point me to heaven."

"Point you to heaven how, Juan? With a sword? A musket? A burning stake? Ready to kill you at any move of disobedience?"

Juan sighed. "I have to have faith. Despite all of that, I know God is God, and I know the Church is the only way to salvation, despite all of its flaws."

"We should stay here, Juan. This is our salvation! They want us to stay!"

"Because God had the bluebird appear and fly left to preserve our lives! We must thank him by returning."

Gabriel was frustrated. "Can we stay here for a few days and get back on our feet?" he asked. "We suffered too long in Cavite and wandered through the jungle. We just had our first real meal in months! We need time to rest and recover!"

Juan knew Gabriel was right. They needed to take time to heal from everything that they had undergone for the past few months. The two were severely malnourished and exhausted from months of forced labor and endless wandering.

"Fine," Juan agreed, "but we leave once we are rested and ready."

Gabriel conveniently did not agree to Juan's terms. He said nothing at all.

The two finished bathing and headed back to the village center. There, they encountered Manihangin, who politely welcomed them into his home. Manihangin sat with the two visitors and began asking even more questions.

"Are you from Cavite?" he asked them.

"No," Gabriel responded. "We are from the mountains east of Manila."

"What were you doing in Cavite?" Manihangin said.

"The foreigners sent us to Cavite to work for them," Gabriel said. "We spent countless days cutting down trees for them and helping them build ships under the threat of death. The work was torture!"

"How did you escape?" Manihangin asked.

"The people from the southern islands came and raided the shore," Gabriel recounted. "We ran into the jungles to avoid getting kidnapped."

"A slave raid," Manihangin thought aloud. "The rumors are true. Since the foreigners came, the slave raids have gotten worse."

Gabriel then began asking questions, "How far away are we from Cavite and Manila?"

Manihangin spent some time thinking of a response and said, "We have wandered so deep in these mountains for years now. Once we use up the land for farming, we relocate deeper within the jungle and find new land to farm and to avoid the foreigners. We do not know how far away we are from the lowlands. We don't trade with most outsiders, just the Aeta that wander these mountains. We keep to ourselves. I guess that we are two or three days away from Manila, given that we have no roads connecting us to the outside world."

"That's perfect!" Gabriel exclaimed. "That's how they were never able to find you!"

"It is the price we pay for freedom," Manihangin responded.

Juan finally spoke up. "Have you ever encountered foreigners before?"

"Fortunately, no," Manihangin replied. "Years ago, our traders told us what the foreigners were doing. We made the difficult decision to relocate to the most remote part of the mountains we could. We haven't looked back since."

"And was it worth it?" Juan asked.

"Freedom is something too precious to give up," Manihangin stated.

"So, it was worth it?" Juan asked again.

Manihangin put his hand on Juan's knee, "Without a doubt. Without a doubt."

Chapter 24

Linga

Not all slept during the night of our ancestors.

The two were allowed to stay with Manihangin and his family for the time being. Manihangin introduced the two visitors to Hanginin, his oldest daughter, who was in her late teens. Hanginin took on the role of being a guide to the two visitors and helped them get acquainted with the village, its geography, and its inhabitants. It felt as though the two men were in a new world, yet a familiar one. The two of them had not experienced life away from the Spanish since their early childhoods, but many aspects of the village gave them a sense of nostalgia.

Hanginin toured them around the village and began introducing them to everyone. She understood her assignment - to do anything in her power to convince these two men to stay with them. If she let them go back to the lowlands, she would risk them alerting the Spanish about the existence of Gatnabundok.

To Hanginin, the Spanish would surely invade the village and forcefully relocate the people if they knew about Gatnabundok.

The people of the village, as all Tagalogs are accustomed to, welcomed the two new men, gave them food, offered assistance in building a house, and gave them other innumerable gifts. The two did not know, but word spread quickly of the 'miracle' that saved these two men's lives. The bluebird flying to the left was a bad omen, and it was clear to the villagers that Bathala did not want anything bad to come upon these men. So, the people did their part to ensure that Bathala's omen would be followed and that the two men would be properly taken care of.

At one house they stopped at, they met a bayugin named Tikatikin. They were maybe in their fifties and seemed to wield considerable influence, given their gold and fine clothing. "Tell me," Tikatikin asked the two men, "how is the life of a bayugin in the lowlands?"

Gabriel did not know how to answer this question and deferred to Juan. Juan, with his experience with Simoyin, could answer honestly. "It's not good," he stated. "The foreigners will make you dress and act as a man, you cannot court or marry a man, and they ban the ceremonies of the anitos."

"They expect me to change who I am completely?"

Tikatikin asked.

"They are aggressive," Gabriel chimed in. "Your life here is far better than what it ever could be in the lowlands."

"I had no plans of ever going down there," Tikatikin responded. "I have a good life here, and I refuse to let it go." The bayugin pondered for a second. "How long have you two lived in the lowlands?"

"We both arrived under Spanish control when we were young children," Gabriel responded.

"The Spanish are the foreigners?" Tikatikin asked.

Gabriel nodded in the affirmative.

"Have you two ever known a bayugin before?" Tikatikin asked.

"I have," Juan said. "I became very close to them in our town before they died. Honestly, their life was horrible in the lowlands."

Juan felt conflicted. He knew the Spanish unfairly hurt Simoyin and Lawahin. It was undeniable to Juan that a bayugin could not fully find peace or grace under the Spanish thumb, and it felt as though the Catholic faith did not provide any place for people that 'violated' their sexual and gender norms. Rolando,

an actual criminal who actively violated the sexual norms of any civilized people, was given special privileges due to his status and connections to the priest. Juan saw all of this, and yet he still believed. He could easily tell Tikatikin to avoid the lowlands because he knew it was not good for them, but he felt that he personally needed to return. The dichotomy of the two mindsets truly made no sense, but in some way, it did for him. He accepted the fact that Arzaga was flawed, and the Spanish were committing horrible atrocities against the Tagalogs. But for some reason, he felt God was real and that God would help him. All of this was just a short trial in the eternal scheme of things.

"Did you ever see this bayugin perform any ceremonies?" Tikatikin asked.

Juan and Gabriel both answered, "No."

"Return to my home tonight," Tikatikin said. "I want you to see the power of our anitos."

* * *

Hanginin escorted the two back to her house where they were fed. Manihangin offered to be the two's debtors if they would work the fields that his current debtors were already working. Gabriel liked this offer more than the datu's offer and accepted on the spot. Juan, who did not plan to make any

commitment to the village, said he needed more time to think about it.

Once fed, Hanginin escorted the two back to Tikatikin's house, where they prepared to witness a ceremony for the anitos. Tikatikin was wearing a different outfit, which Gabriel and Juan were told was their ceremonial clothes. The bayugin had a wooden humanoid figure covered in gold placed in the center of the room, with incense burning and a mat next to the figure's feet.

"This is an image of the anito Linga," Tikatikin explained to their guests. "Linga can be the cause of many ailments." They paused for a second and then decided to elaborate to their guests. "Don't think of Linga as bad, though. Linga is like fire – a neutral force that can benefit life or take life away."

A man approached the house carrying a black chicken that was tied up. He called to Tikatikin and entered their home. The bayugin took the chicken and invited the man to lie on the mat at the feet of Linga. Tikatikin began speaking to Juan and Gabriel, "This man has been ill for several days. What I will do is cast Linga away from him."

Tikatikin faced the man. "What are your symptoms?"

The man responded, "Headache, sore throat, cough, night sweats, chest aches."

"How long have you endured these ailments?" Tikatikin asked.

"For six days," he responded.

This response concerned Tikatikin. "We need to act now," they said. They went to a corner of the home, obtained some betel nut, and began chewing it. The bayugin returned to their patient and began chanting in an indecipherable language.

Tikatikin took the chicken the man gave them and slit its throat over a bowl. Continuing their chanting, they mixed some of the blood with a bowl of rice wine. Once sufficiently mixed, the bayugin began drinking from the bowl. The bowl was passed around, and all were expected to drink from it.

Hanginin drank with no hesitation. Gabriel followed suit. When the bowl got to Juan, he fought an internal battle as to whether he was worthy enough to drink this wine and blood. Arzaga thought he was not worthy to partake of the flesh and blood of Christ. Would this be any different? Juan looked at Gabriel, and Gabriel motioned to him to drink it. He obliged by taking a small sip and passed the bowl to Tikatikin. Tikatikin then

pressed the bowl to the lips of their patient, and he drank from the bowl.

Taking the dead chicken, Tikatikin opened up its body, and tossed its entrails next to the patient. They examined the entrails while dangling a beaded string above the organs. Once complete, Tikatikin announced that the man would survive this ailment. Tikatikin dipped their finger in their mouth, drenching their finger in betel nut juice. They then wiped this betel nut juice on the forehead, throat, arms, and chest of the sick man. The chanting in the unknown language continued as Tikatikin slowly began to dance.

After some time, Tikatikin collapsed near the man on the opposite side of the chicken entrails and lay motionless for several minutes. Gabriel was fascinated with everything happening, while Juan worried about offending God for even watching the ceremony. Finally, Tikatikin came to, arose, and announced, "Linga had been expelled from the man's presence. He will begin to recover now."

The man sighed in relief. Tikatikin took the rest of the chicken outside, defeathered it, cooked it, and offered it to the image of Linga on a banana leaf. The excess food was shared with Gabriel, Juan, Hanginin, and the patient.

While eating their ceremonial meal, Tikatikin asked the two newcomers how they felt about what they witnessed. Juan sincerely felt a power behind the ceremony and was honored that he was allowed to drink their form of the Eucharist. But he also knew that the offering was to Linga, the anito of illness and disease, and not God, the deity of the Spanish. He truly felt as though he betrayed his own religion, but he could not deny the power behind the ceremony.

Gabriel responded, "Everything makes sense now. We've spent years away from our ceremonies and practices to bow before a foreign anito. The foreign anito doesn't take care of us and lets our people die in suffering. This ceremony directly targets the cause of the illness and fixes it. It felt so right and natural. This is the way of our people! Of our lands!"

Juan wished he could have felt the same way. "I found many parts of it to be profound," Juan said. "I appreciated that I could drink the wine."

Gabriel intervened, "The Spanish do not let everyone drink the sacred wine in their practices."

"Why?" Tikatikin asked.

"They only want the obedient to partake," Gabriel responded. "The ceremonies are limited to a select few participants."

"That is terrible," Tikatikin replied. "They withhold the spiritual from people? What kind of religious person would do that?"

For decades, the Spanish had been invited to the various ceremonies performed by the Tagalogs and other indigenous peoples. The Tagalogs welcomed all with no thought of origin, age, or worthiness. The Spanish introduced something exclusive, something that was restricted. The Eucharist was only offered to a select few, despite the faithfulness of Catholic practitioners.

Chapter 25

Lakapati

In the solitude of my mountains I feel free.

The following morning, Manihangin invited his two guests to go on a hunt with him. "This is the perfect time of year to hunt wild boar," he told them. "It's their mating season, and groups of them are all over the jungle."

Neither Juan nor Gabriel had hunted before, not even in San Tadeo. Curiously, the two accepted the invitation. They were armed with spears and daggers that were sheathed at their waists. They joined Manihangin and four other male hunters and made their way into the jungle. Two of the hunters had bows and arrows with them, while another man brought two hunting dogs.

Manihangin briefly taught the two how to creep in the dense jungle, allowing them to approach any boar they saw in complete silence. The two dogs, however, were making a lot of

noise as they wandered back and forth from the party of hunters to random parts of the jungle.

After several minutes of wandering the jungle, the hunting party caught sight of a group of boars in the distance. The men, minus the one with the dogs, crept as quietly as they could towards the boars, taking any chance they had to hide behind the leaves and flora that blanketed the ground of the jungle. The man with the dogs held onto both of the dogs in the distance, making sure that the two animals would not interfere with the sneak attack on the prey.

Feeling that he was close enough, one man took his bow and arrow and shot at one of the boars. The arrow penetrated the hind leg of the boar. The group of boars immediately fled into the jungle. The injured boar tried to escape and successfully shook the arrow out of its leg. Unfortunately for the boar, the injury slowed it down. The dogs were released, and they ran and tackled the wounded boar. The men approached the boar, which was still alive, and Manihangin took his spear and pierced its heart. The boar stopped struggling and fell over onto the ground.

The group of men celebrated and relished the idea of bringing their dead trophy back to the village and sharing its meat with their neighbors.

The group then discussed their next plans. Should they get another boar? Should they head back to the village? Juan, already bored with what was going on, volunteered to go back. Gabriel, seeing his friend offering to leave, said he would go with Juan to make sure he would not get lost. The two were then tasked with taking the dead boar back as the five others agreed to try to find another boar to kill.

Juan and Gabriel carried the carcass through the jungle. "Even this is better than Cavite," Gabriel remarked. "I know it's bloody and attracts flies, but I would choose moving this over the lumber. We'll actually get something out of this! It's not like we benefited in any way from the ships we were helping to build."

The two reminisced (or rather complained) about their time in Cavite as they reached the jungle's edge and approached the dry rice fields of Gatnabundok.

"Okay," Juan started, "where were we supposed to take this?"

Gabriel laughed. "We should have asked that in the jungle with the other men! Now we're out here awkwardly hauling a dead boar! How embarrassing!"

Fortunately, Hanginin saw the two hauling the dead animal and went to them to assist. "We can take it to our house," she told the men.

Relieved that Hanginin was there to save them, Gabriel and Juan carried the beast to the grounds around Hanginin's home. "Can you assist us in preparing the carcass?" she asked the men.

"Yes, please," Juan eagerly responded. "Anything is better than hunting!"

"Oh, it wasn't that bad," Gabriel told Juan.

"Says the guy that spent his lifetime hunting fish," Juan joked, playfully pushing Gabriel.

Juan was not very fond of masculine activities. Gabriel tended to assimilate better to these masculine types of tasks given that he was expected to do them for his family back in San Tadeo. Luckily, Juan was raised by a mother and sisters who did not mind allowing him to do 'womanly' chores. Truly, most of the Tagalogs did not mind, either. The only people that were bothered by it were the Catholic priests and the Spanish invaders, but even their influence could not stop Juan from doing what he was gifted to do.

Hanginin began boiling water and conversed with the two men. Once it was hot enough, she poured the water all over the boar and told the men to start removing its hair. The hot water loosened the hair on the boar's skin, making it easy for the two men to use their daggers to scrape all of the hair off without tearing its flesh.

"The skin is the best part," Hanginin told the two. "Make sure you don't cut any of the skin off!"

Once finished with the hair removal, the two assisted Hanginin in roasting the carcass. As the carcass was cooking, the other hunters returned with two more boars. Juan and Gabriel continued their assignments with the other two boars by removing the hair and helping Hanginin roast them.

The events of the day, including the cooking, helped Gabriel feel close to the village. He felt like he had a role in a community that was not trying to abuse his labor. Instead, the community worked together to assist each other and keep the village out of Spain's reach. This was becoming a new home for him, even if it meant abandoning his own family in San Tadeo. Going back to San Tadeo risked punishment and death. Neither of those were options in the mountains, and Gabriel felt that staying in the village was the better choice.

That evening, the village was gathered together in the house of the datu and feasted on the wins from the hunt earlier that day. All equally partook, and none were excluded. Though the Tagalogs in the lowlands shared the same as these mountain Tagalogs, Juan could not help but notice that the Spanish did not act the same and would frequently withhold their winnings from the townspeople.

* * *

A few days later, the village attended a public ceremony performed by Tikatikin. Men from the village brought a fattened hog to the ceremony. The pig had its mouth and feet bound and occasionally squealed and wiggled as the men carried it to a spread of banana leaves resting on the ground at the center of the ceremony.

Tikatikin brought another image of a different anito. This time, the figurine was intersex and decorated with various pieces of jewelry and clothing. Pulling the two newcomers aside, Tikatikin explained, "This is Lakapati, the anito of sown fields and fertility. The anito consists of both male and female anatomy. The combination of male and female is an incredibly powerful force, which is why we are lucky that Lakapati is the patron of growing our food."

The bayugin continued, "That is why the bayugins are considered more powerful than the priestesses - we are a combination of both male and female. Male in body, female in heart."

The datu and his wife went before the image of Lakapati and sat down on pillows facing the pig. "The datu and his wife symbolize the village," Tikatikin told the men. "What I do to them, I do to all. Remember that."

Once the village was assembled, the pig was laid on the banana leaves, the image of Lakapati was presented, and Tikatikin was dressed for the occasion with their long hair braided, the ceremony began. Rice wine was poured and mixed with herbs and blessed by Tikatikin. The wine was passed among the villagers, who all partook. This time, Juan had no internal conflicts about partaking.

Tikatikin then called to Lakapati, "Oh Lord Lakapati, please let our fields grow so our children do not go hungry!"

The various young parents of the village then had their small children stand up, face the image of Lakapati, and pray, "Lakapati, feed us thy slaves, let us not hunger."

The bayugin then partook of the rice wine that was passed around and began chanting and dancing. A villager

provided them with a spear, and Tikatikin started dancing with the spear and imitating piercing the pig with it.

After making numerous circles around the hog, Tikatikin pointed the spear repeatedly at the heart of the animal. After doing this several times, Tikatikin finally pierced the hog's heart. The animal let out one loud final squeal and slowly died. Tikatikin took their hand and dipped it in the blood of the hog, went to the datu and his wife, and smeared the blood on their foreheads.

Various men then took the hog and roasted it. The whole village was fed from the hog, along with rice and other dishes the villagers had prepared, and the village celebrated the start of another planting season.

"It is truly amazing that we can still do this," Tikatikin remarked. "So many people have suffered under the authority of the foreigners. Here, we are still free. We can worship and live as we please, and we can worship the true anitos of this land."

The entire experience thrilled Gabriel. He was deeply impressed by both of the ceremonies he and Juan witnessed with Tikatikin. He thought back to his grandmother, who passed away when he was a small child, passing before he relocated to San Tadeo. She was a powerful priestess in the village of his

birth, and Gabriel began to wonder if he had inherited that gift from her. Was he meant to be a bayugin?

Juan, conversely, thought back to the Church. He turned his memory to his mother and the women's confraternity she frequented. It seemed that the women of the Church were the true backbone of the organization. Without the women, nothing would get done. Yes, men held the priesthood and men had their own confraternity, but women seemed to have a quieter and stronger devotion. Juan thought back to what Tikatikin had said about the combination of the male and the female being spiritually powerful. To some extent, Juan was male in body and female in heart. Perhaps he, like the bayugin, could contribute something powerful to the Church in the lowlands.

Chapter 26

Pananampalataya

I want to save her; to save her, I want to live...

Time pressed forward as Juan and Gabriel got more comfortable in Gatnabundok. Gabriel relished the lack of forced labor, forced church attendance, and forced confessions. He continued to delve deeper into the Tagalog religion with Tikatikin. Every day, it seemed, Gabriel made his way to Tikatikin's home to learn more of the ways of the pre-Christian Tagalogs. It was one of the many things he was robbed of as a child when his family was forcefully relocated to San Tadeo.

Juan, on the other hand, still felt the need to go home to San Tadeo. He missed his family and the Church. Every day, he thought about how he should have just said whatever Arzaga wanted him to, so he could be in full communion with the Church. How lucky he was, he thought, that he was able to take the Eucharist when so many other people in his community

would never be given that opportunity. What a waste to throw that all away because of a simple misunderstanding! And, once in full communion, perhaps Juan could fulfill his role as a masculine bayugin to the Catholic Church in San Tadeo. Maybe Juan was what the Church really needed.

Both of the men silently knew what the other wanted, though they never openly talked about it. Juan felt guilty about his desire to leave because Gabriel was finally connecting with something that he loved. He thought he could not ask Gabriel to leave Gatnabundok after seeing how much joy the village gave him.

But enough time had passed, and Juan felt he could not stay any longer. He needed to admit fault for the rape to Arzaga and receive communion again. Eternity was much longer than the pleasures of mortal life. He would only need to suffer through his miserable life for several more years if he repented. Then, he could rest in the presence of God and the saints. At least there was a possibility he could.

One morning, Juan approached Gabriel. "I need to tell you something."

Gabriel, already sensing what it was about, listened. "Go ahead."

"I need to go back to San Tadeo," Juan started.

"How many times have we been through this?" Gabriel responded. "Going back is a death sentence!"

Juan stood firm. "I'm going back. I have to."

"Why, Juan?" Gabriel asked. "Don't you like it here? I have never been this free before in my life, and I know you haven't, either."

"Gatnabundok is truly beautiful," Juan said, "but God is calling me back to San Tadeo."

"But the anitos have called us here, Juan!" Gabriel stated.

"I need to follow God, not the anitos," Juan responded.

"You saw the fairy bluebird, Juan!" Gabriel tried to reason. "That bird, not the dove, was the reason we were saved. That bird showed the villagers not to harm us!"

"You are right," Juan replied. "The fairy bluebird saved us, and God sent it."

"Why would God want you to go back?" Gabriel asked. "He allowed you to go through so much pain and suffering under the Spanish. Is this a God you really want to worship?"

"I know he is the one true God," Juan quietly declared.

"How do you know, Juan?"

"He saved my sister," Juan began. "He didn't let her die when we prayed to the saints. He protected us in Cavite. He saved us from the villagers. I cannot deny that he is all-powerful. I need to go down to the lowlands to worship him and get back in communion with him. I know, Gabriel, that none of this makes sense to you. How can it? But there is a deep and quiet power about God and the Church that I cannot shake from my heart. This village, its people, their religion, it's all beautiful. But it cannot replace God or His Church in my heart. I have to return. I know it doesn't make any sense, but I just have to go back."

"At what cost?" Gabriel asked.

"The cost of my eternal soul," Juan stated.

"What about your safety, Juan?"

Juan sighed again. "God will help me overcome whatever punishment is given to me just as he did when he helped Jesus."

Gabriel scoffed, "God let Jesus die! Is that how he's going to help you?"

"But Jesus rose from the dead," Juan retorted.

"What about me, Juan?" Gabriel finally asked. "You really want to abandon me?"

"You know I don't want to abandon you," Juan stated.

"You know that's not the reason why I'm going back."

"Juan," Gabriel insisted, "your life is infinitely better here in the mountains. Away from the Spanish! And you're going to give it all up because of a guilty conscience for a sin that is not yours?"

"I have to go back. God has a higher plan for me."

"You don't have to, Juan," Gabriel said, holding back tears. "Please! Stay!"

"Gabriel," Juan started, "I gave myself to the Church. I marked my soul with my confirmation. I am God's, and I need to go back where God is. He is not here."

"You're choosing God over your safety. Over me?" Gabriel asked.

Juan began to tear up. "You know this isn't easy for me to do. But I need to trust in God, even as Abraham trusted God when he was told to sacrifice his only son."

"Am I your Isaac?" Gabriel asked. "You are going to sacrifice me?"

Tears streamed down Juan's face. "It's what God wants. It hurts, and I truly hate it, but I must follow through."

Gabriel silently cried.

"You saved me, Gabriel," Juan continued. "You rescued me in Cavite when I froze in front of the pirates. You protected me and fed me in the jungle. You were with me when we were imprisoned in the farmhouse. You believed me when I told you what happened with Rolando. I will never forget that, Gabriel. But I must put God first. He is the reason why we are still alive."

Gabriel continued to cry. Both of the men quietly stood, allowing their emotions to flow through. Their quiet sobs were the only thing that broke the silence.

After some time, Gabriel, still crying, faced Juan. He put both hands on Juan's face and lightly kissed him on the forehead. He pulled Juan into an embrace. "I love you, Juan."

Juan, accepting the embrace, stood in silence with his tears intensifying.

"I've always loved you, Juan," Gabriel said, breaking the embrace. "And I will always love you. Even if you give me up for God."

Juan pulled his hand to his mouth and muffled his sobs.

"Since we were kids, you were always special to me. I wanted you in my life. A few years back, I realized that this was love. Overpowering love. But I knew your commitment to the Church. So, I let go of the dream of us being in love. Instead, I

focused on a deep and strong friendship. And I finally got that! Cavite was a death sentence, but it brought us together. It's truly a miracle that you and I fell into this turmoil together. We grew and bonded over all of it and created something I have only dreamed of. And I think it's something you thought you would never have, either." Gabriel then sniffled and wiped away his own tears on his face. "And now you're walking away from it."

Gabriel continued, "I looked for any way to be in your life more. And it finally came in Cavite. The labor was hard and rough, but we were finally together. And you wouldn't run from the pirates. I couldn't... I couldn't let you do that!"

Juan sniffled, "This whole time, Gabriel?"

"The jungle was great, Juan. I'll never forget those days where we stood by each other's sides and helped each other survive. It was all I ever wanted."

Juan finally responded, "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," Gabriel replied. "In the end, your best trait is your loyalty, even if it is to God. I know I cannot ask you to throw that away, no matter how senseless God is."

The two stood in silence, drying their tears and suppressing their sobs.

After some time thinking, Gabriel said, "I'm coming with you. I love it here, but I love you more. This can't be home without you."

"Gabriel," Juan started.

"If I have to choose between Gatnabundok and you," Gabriel interrupted, "I will choose you."

"Gabriel, you're happy here!" Juan said.

"I know," Gabriel replied, "but I would never be truly happy without you."

"You don't have to follow me," Juan pleaded.

"I would rather suffer in the lowlands under the oppression of the Church if it meant you would be in my life. If it meant I could see you daily. If it meant this friendship, this brotherhood, would continue."

This confession pierced Juan's heart. Gabriel truly loved him more than anything else. He would give up his life to suffer with Juan.

"I can't live my life without you, Juan," Gabriel continued. "Not after everything we went through. After everything we built together. I need you."

Juan was speechless. All this time, he looked for love and acceptance from Rolando. When the opportunity appeared,

Rolando violated him. But someone who loved him, genuinely loved him, was there all along. And he was always there near him at San Tadeo. He spent the past several weeks with him and developed a deep friendship. It was all that he ever wanted.

"Gabriel," Juan said after sorting through this pleasant shock, "thank you."

Gabriel, still drying his tears, replied, "Can we say goodbye to Tikatikin before we leave?"

Chapter 27

Babasuhan

But I believe in Him; I have felt more than once His hand upon me.

Juan and Gabriel said their goodbyes to Tikatikin and Hanginin, emphasizing they were leaving for their families, not for the Spanish religion. "Thank you so much for taking us in," Juan told them.

"We promise we will not speak about you to the Spanish or anyone in the lowlands," Gabriel said. "We care about you too much, but you know how important family is."

"It is very noble of you to go back to your families in the face of danger," Tikatikin noted. "Gabriel, you would have been an excellent acolyte, but you are making the more honorable decision."

Juan and Gabriel made their way through the town, giving their farewells to the villagers. "We won't let the Spanish

hurt you," Juan repeatedly told the villagers. "We can't do that after all you did for us. Nobody else will know of the goodness you gave to us in our time of need."

The two made their way to the datu and Manihangin. Gabriel bowed deeply before them and expressed unending gratitude for their compassion and understanding. "We will protect your secret," he told the two. "You have my word."

The datu put his hand on Gabriel's shoulder. "You two are always welcome back if you can come back safely. Please, bring your families when you return."

Gabriel had secretly felt that Juan needed to see the contrast of San Tadeo from Gatnabundok. Perhaps that would motivate him to return to Gatnabundok. It was an extreme decision, but possibly Juan could have a change of heart, and they could bring their families back up to this village. The two of them could have everything that they wanted, and they could be happy and free.

The two men then made their way out of the village and began to head northwest in the jungle. They spent the next few days navigating the mountains and jungle, something that they had gotten used to doing together since they had wandered the

jungles after fleeing Cavite. Days later, they made their way to the southern shores of Pulilan, the massive lake east of Manila.

They followed the edge of Pulilan to the northwest and made their way towards Manila. Once on the outskirts of Manila, they asked the local Tagalogs how to get to San Tadeo. Fortunately, a few of them knew how to get there, and they pointed them to specific paths to the east that would take them back to the town.

As they approached the mountains that housed San Tadeo, Juan got nervous. He did not know what awaited him back in San Tadeo, but he was willing to face whatever God would bestow upon him. Gabriel, on the other hand, was filled with dread. He sensed that something awful would happen to both of them. But his love for Juan trumped his instincts, and the two pressed forward.

They began to climb the mountain, knowing very well that they were close to San Tadeo. To their pleasant surprise, they ran into Lawahin, who was in the jungles of the mountain collecting fruits and herbs.

"You're both alive!" she shouted when she saw them and ran straight to them, hugging both of them. "We thought all five of you were killed in Cavite."

"The other three did not come back?" Juan asked.

"No. No one came back," Lawahin responded.

Gabriel and Juan had no idea what the fate of their three partners was in Cavite. They began relaying their story to Lawahin: of their unexpected extension of labor in Cavite, the raid, and their escape. Keeping the promise they had made earlier to Tikatikin and the other villagers, they omitted the fact that they had encountered Gatnabundok and spent several days there.

Lawahin was ecstatic, but her tone changed after the exchange of pleasantries. "Juan, you cannot go back to town."

"Why not?" Juan replied. "What about my family?"

Lawahin sighed. "We've had four more mothers die in childbirth since you two have been gone."

The news shocked both of the men. They felt they had not been gone that long, but having four mothers die in such a short period of time shook them to their cores. Gabriel immediately thought of a manananggal being the cause of the deaths. He knew Arzaga was not letting anyone follow any of their old traditions during childbirth. That left the mothers vulnerable to the horrific creature.

Lawahin looked directly at Juan. "Arzaga started to tell the town that you are a bayugin. He said you would go about seducing the men of the town and give offerings to the devil."

Juan's heart dropped. The seal of confidentiality did not apply to his confession. Arzaga distorted Juan's trauma and used it against him. "Why did he do that?" Juan asked.

"He couldn't blame the deaths of the childbirths on the Church or on the saints," Lawahin replied. "So, he fabricated a story and made you a 'servant of the devil.' Just like he did to Simoyin and I."

"But I was gone this whole time," Juan stated. "I don't understand."

Lawahin sighed again. "He said you made a pact with the devil and became a manananggal. He told the town that you never went to Cavite and that you disappeared from his sights on the way to Manila. He said that you lived in the jungles around San Tadeo and preyed on the townsfolk."

Juan was shocked. "Why me?" he asked.

"You were his easiest target," Lawahin said. "And he thought the five of you died in Cavite. It was easy to make a dead man the enemy in the name of the Church."

"Juan," Gabriel said, "we cannot go back. You cannot go back."

Juan was utterly speechless. "I came all this way for God," he said after a long pause.

"You two need to leave NOW," Lawahin demanded.

"We literally just walked outside of Manila," Juan said. "We asked for directions. The people knew where we were going. Word is going to spread that we're back and alive."

"It doesn't matter," Gabriel said. "There are tens of thousands of people in Manila. Who is going to run into the same people we ran into?"

"They know where San Tadeo is," Juan responded.

Gabriel panicked slightly. "We can go further north. We can go to Pampanga or Pangasinan if we have to. Hell, I'll follow you to Ilokos if it means you'd stay alive!"

"God was with us in the jungle," Juan said. "He was with us at Cavite. He will be with us at San Tadeo."

"Juan, please, no," Gabriel responded.

"Going to San Tadeo is suicide," Lawahin said. "It's suicide having you two right here so close to the town!"

"God will protect me just as he protected Isaac," Juan said, beginning to head in the direction of the town.

"Juan!" Gabriel pulled him on his shoulder. "They think you're a monster. They think you have blood on your hands. They will kill you!"

"Come with me," Juan told Gabriel. "You can be my witness. I am not a beast. We can go straight to the church. A manananggal would never go to the church or ask for forgiveness."

Lawahin could sense exactly what was happening. She knew Juan was dedicated to the Church, and he had come all this way to reconcile himself with Arzaga and the Church and to be with his family. She feared for his life, but she knew she could not stop him.

"So be it," she said. "Gabriel, go with him. I'll watch from afar. Some of the people already believe that I'm a witch. If I went into town with Juan, it would cause more problems."

Lawahin reached into her bag, which she had been using to collect her herbs, and pulled out a crocodile tooth. "Take this talisman. It will protect you." Juan took it and hugged Lawahin.

Gabriel and Juan began walking to the town with Lawahin watching from the jungle. As they entered the rice paddies surrounding the town, they saw the townspeople begin

to notice them. Some ran to their homes to tell their families. Others went to their neighbors to spread the word, pointing at the two men. To their surprise, Gabriel was still alive.

The two made it to the town center without making contact with anyone. Gabriel felt something was off. Juan had his sight focused on the church. "Once we get to the church," he thought aloud, "all would be well."

Gabriel noticed that people began to leave their houses and slowly approach the two of them. The townspeople held sharpened bamboo sticks and bolo knives as they slowly approached - signs that the people honestly thought Juan was a manananggal.

Juan and Gabriel approached the church and discovered that the entrance was blocked off. Juan tried to summon Arzaga by calling for him next to the entrance of the church. The priest made his way out of the back rooms of the church. When he saw through the windows who had summoned him, he stood in awe that the two were still alive.

The people of the town began to encircle the two of them slowly.

"Father," Juan shouted, "let us into the church! I want to confess."

Arzaga stood motionless inside the church, watching the scene unfold from afar. Gabriel looked at the townspeople and tried to reason with them. "I know you think Juan is dangerous," he told them, "but trust me, he is human! We can prove it!"

"Father!" Juan continued to wail. "I need to confess! I want salvation! Please!"

"Please drop your weapons," Gabriel pleaded as the townspeople pressed the two men up against the church surrounding them on all sides. "You don't want to do this! Please!"

Without any warning, the townspeople began attacking Juan. "FATHER!" Juan screamed as the bamboo spears and knives cut his flesh.

Arzaga stood inside the church and did nothing. He needed a sacrifice, and Juan was perfect for that role. A vicious smile slowly crept onto Arzaga's face as he watched Juan getting attacked.

Gabriel tried to help, but he was pulled away by several men. He tried to fight back to get back to Juan, but two men held him back. Gabriel squirmed in the arms of the two men as he helplessly watched Juan get attacked. Finally, one man impaled Juan in the stomach with a bamboo spear. The color left Juan's

face as his eyes gazed into the distance. Another slit his throat with his bolo. Juan, struggling for air, silently fell to the ground as the people continued to attack him.

After some time, the people abandoned what was left of Juan's desecrated body. The two men holding Gabriel back eventually dropped him on the ground and walked away. Gabriel crawled up to the lifeless body of the man he loved. He knelt down, cradled his head, and wept.

"You loved the Church so much," Gabriel cried. "You were willing to give everything to it and to God. And look how they have repaid your loyalty!" He wiped away the tears that were streaming down his face. "Imagine the life that we could've had together in the mountains! We never should have come back. We would've been happy together. You could have lived so much longer and not have left me alone!"

He bent down and kissed Juan's lifeless forehead. "Even in death, I still love you. I don't think I could ever stop loving you." He rested his head against Juan's and quietly sobbed for several hours.

After saying his final goodbye to Juan, Gabriel left the site of death, returned to his family, ordered them to follow him, and left town with his parents and siblings. Gabriel and his family

headed back towards Gatnabundok, ensuring that no one followed them. After seeing what the Church and its followers did to his innocent friend, Gabriel never returned to San Tadeo.

Do not forget those who have fallen during the night!

Chapter 28

Pagsisihan

With the oppressors or with my country!

San Tadeo was never the same after the townspeople killed Juan. The issue of deaths during childbirth continued, despite the fact that the supposed manananggal was dead. Father Arzaga came up with another excuse as to why the deaths continued to happen. Faith in the priest began to wane as the number of deceased mothers and babies continued to climb. The lack of miracles attributed to the saints made the people doubt Arzaga's power. Many began to question the power of the saints and of God.

Eventually, Arzaga was relocated to a different town in the islands. He was replaced by another priest who was much younger and struggled more with speaking Tagalog. The new priest was laxer on childbirth rituals and allowed Lawahin and others to incorporate their old traditions with prayers to the saints

as long as he approved of what they were doing. This younger priest knew the Church would only survive with the syncretic help of the Tagalog people. Once Lawahin and the midwives had more control of childbirths, deaths during childbirth declined, and the people began to have more faith in the Church. Lawahin did not intend for this increase of faith, but it was an unintended consequence of her service to her town.

Juan's family was devastated by his death. To them, this was Juan's second death. They assumed he was dead with the other four in Cavite, and they refused to believe Arzaga's slander about their son and brother being a manananggal. On the day of Juan's execution, Marta and Sara looked from afar, wondering what was going on at the church. They did not realize until later that Juan had been killed by their neighbors while pleading for confession and mercy.

Marta prayed for Juan's soul every night at the church. She knew her son was not a monster nor a shaman. After the ordeal, she refused to talk to Arzaga while he still lived in San Tadeo, though she continued to serve the physical church and confraternity in whatever ways she could without making contact with the priest. When she was required to confess once a year, she listened to the endless questions Arzaga would ask her and

answered them appropriately, denying any sin. Arzaga, in her mind, could never be forgiven and could never be trusted. Such a wicked man could never have the authority to forgive sins!

Sara stopped eating for several days. When she finally ate again, she only ate small portions of food every day. She refused to eat a full meal for months. On occasion, she would join her mother in the church to pray for her deceased brother. She did not know what else to do or how to contact Juan. He was so disconnected from all of the other anitos; praying to God was the only way that made sense to contact him. Unfortunately, the very institution that saw her brother's death was the only means she could see herself contacting her brother.

Noe was not particularly close to Juan, but Juan's death shook him. He had questioned for some time if Juan was a bayugin or a binabae, but it did not bother him. Juan was his brother, and he was happy that Juan helped with the birth of his daughter by getting Lawahin immediately. While surely Lawahin was the reason Sara and her daughter stayed alive, Juan did what he could to assist Noe and his family. On rare occasions, Noe would join Sara in praying for Juan at the church.

Lawahin felt emotionless for weeks after the murder. Like Sara, she stopped eating for days before finally eating small

amounts of rice. In the dead of night, when Arzaga was not in San Tadeo, she would practice her old ceremonies to try to commune with the soul of Juan. This she did for years with no success until enough time had passed to heal her heart. Once she finally came to peace with Juan's death, she accepted that she would never speak with him again. "Perhaps he found his way to heaven," she thought to herself. "Maybe his God is a merciful being."

After Arzaga was relocated, Lawahin was allowed to assist with childbirths to some extent. She frequently called on Marta and Sara to assist the laboring mothers. Every time the three women worked together on helping a laboring mother, they thought of Juan and his willingness to do anything to help Sara during her time of need, even if it meant disobeying his own religion and summoning the town's 'witch' to save his sister's life. Frequently assisting in the childbirths, Sara would begin to shed tears thinking of the brother that saved her and who was stolen from her.

Rolando eventually took over the tax-collecting responsibilities of his father. He asked for even more money than his father did, which caused much contention in the town. While doing his job, he was frequently threatened and berated by the

townspeople. Some, especially Noe, began to question Rolando's role in Juan's death. One night, Rolando disappeared and was nowhere to be found for several days. After a few weeks had passed, his decapitated body was discovered on the outskirts of town, hidden in the brush of the jungle. His head was never located.

Gabriel, by some miracle, was able to make his way back to Gatnabundok with his family without being followed. They walked for days just to go back to the one place Gabriel felt safe in. Manihangin welcomed him back and offered to help supply him and his family with their needs in exchange for Gabriel working his fields. Gabriel accepted this offer, went into debt, built a house, and began working in Manihangin's fields.

After formally establishing himself in Gatnabundok, Gabriel became Tikatikin's acolyte, something that brought great joy to the bayugin. One night, Gabriel had a dream in which he escaped the physical world and found himself in the invisible world of spirits. In this dream, he communed with spirits and anitos and learned how to serve them. This dream's message was clear - Gabriel was called to become a priest of the old religion. Gabriel took on the role of bayugin with modifications. He only wore women's clothing when he performed ceremonies

and lived as a man outside of his religious duties. It was something unknown to the people of Gatnabundok, but the accommodation was made because of Gabriel's perceived spiritual gifts and unusual background.

Like Lawahin, Gabriel was able to commune with the souls of the dead. He spent years trying to perfect the art of contact so he could reach the soul of Juan. Contact was never made, but that did not stop Gabriel from creating an image of Juan. This image was one of the few images that was never put into storage and always remained on display in his house. On the anniversary of Juan's murder, Gabriel would leave freshly-caught fish and foraged food from the jungle at the foot of Juan's image. With tears in his eyes, he would lay the bag Juan made for him in the jungle up against the wall next to the image.

The years went on, and the people of Gatnabundok continued to move their village deeper and deeper into the jungle and were never caught by the Spanish in Gabriel's lifetime. Gabriel stayed with the village until the end, living a life he almost wanted. There was, however, a life that Gabriel wanted more but could not have.

Appendix A

Jose Rizal's quotes at the beginning of every chapter.

Each chapter of this novel begins with a quote from Jose Rizal's revolutionary works *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*. Each phrase is not taken in context with how Rizal wrote them in his novels, and I do not intend to misconstrue the original meaning of Rizal's words within their original context. It is interesting, however, that Rizal's message of liberty and self-determination from the nineteenth century seems to fit well with the liberty and self-determination of the Tagalog people during the initial period of Spanish colonization. Perhaps my opinion is influenced by the Philippine nationalism that Rizal unintentionally created in the Katipunan.

Rizal wrote both books in Spanish, the lingua franca of the Philippines in the nineteenth century. I use his words in English translated by Soledad Lacson-Loosin in her translations of the novels published through the University of Hawaii Press in 1997 and 2007.

Chapter 1

*Historians write that the old inhabitants of the Philippines
venerated and deified their ancestors.*

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 67.

Chapter 2

*Terrorism is useful when the people are enslaved, when the
mountains have no caves, when power places behind each tree
a sentry.*

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 327.

Chapter 3

*The most optimistic imagine that their great grandparents still
roast in purgatory.*

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 68.

Chapter 4

*After all, what is it to you that he fools these poor gullible Indios?
They should be smarter.*

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 284.

Chapter 5

*His imagination saw other things besides...but who can write
what a passionate mind can imagine?*

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 276.

Chapter 6

*Here, all independent thought, all words which are not an echo of
the will of the powerful, are judged as subversion, and you know
very well what that means.*

From *El Filibusterismo*, page 227-228.

Chapter 7

*Why does that God have to take my iniquity more into account
than the cries of so many innocents?*

From *El Filibusterismo*, page 312.

Chapter 8

Do you think that the Philippines will be preserved by the friars?

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 330.

Chapter 9

Be content and speak in your own language and don't spoil

Spanish – it is not for the likes of you.

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 106.

Chapter 10

God has delivered me from greater perils!

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 408.

Chapter 11

*You will say that no matter how imperfect is our religion today, it
is preferable to what we previously had.*

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 329.

Chapter 12

*If you have seen what I have, miserable creatures, unfortunates
suffering indescribable tortures for crimes they have not
committed.*

From *El Filibusterismo*, page 313.

Chapter 13

To keep the Filipino docile, it must be repeated to him day after day what he is, to convince him that he is incompetent.

From *El Filibusterismo*, page 167.

Chapter 14

And you, the religion preached for a suffering humanity, you must have forgotten your mission to comfort the oppressed in their misery, and to humble the powerful in their pride.

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 88.

Chapter 15

And would these sacrifices produce the fruits I hope for?

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 173.

Chapter 16

Is that the law of Jesus Christ? For this it was not necessary for God to have Himself crucified.

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 329.

Chapter 17

We pay no attention to these excommunications! We all are already excommunicated.

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 322.

Chapter 18

It is true that I cannot love or be happy in my own country, but I can suffer and die in it.

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 404.

Chapter 19

See how ungrateful these Indios are! How can they be treated like human beings?

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 391.

Chapter 20

To suffer...to work...What God is This?

From *El Filibusterismo*, page 313.

Chapter 21

Come with me and we will live together like brothers.

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 403.

Chapter 22

If I believed in miracles, I would not believe in God: I would believe in a man deified; I would believe that man created God in his image and likeness.

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 225.

Chapter 23

I have decided to leave the province where I was living to go north and dwell among the independent tribes of infidels.

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 302.

Chapter 24

Not all slept during the night of our ancestors.

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 165.

Chapter 25

In the solitude of my mountains I feel free.

From *El Filibusterismo*, page 207.

Chapter 26

But I believe in Him; I have felt more than once His hand upon me.

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 225.

Chapter 27

I want to save her; to save her, I want to live...

From *El Filibusterismo*, page 199.

Do not forget those who have fallen during the night!

From *Noli Me Tangere*, page 421.

Chapter 28

With the oppressors or with my country!

From *El Filibusterismo*, page 198.

Appendix B

The meanings and definitions of the chapter titles.

The following are the names of all the chapter headings in this book. Each chapter heading was given a word from a seventeenth-century Spanish-Tagalog dictionary: *Vocabulario de Lengua Tagala* by Fr. Pedro de San Buenaventura, published in Pila, Laguna in 1613.

I write the dictionary entries word-for-word in Spanish and Old Tagalog. There are many letters that Buenaventura marked to indicate that he shortened a Spanish word. Since the symbols he used to mark the shortened words cannot be found in most fonts, I took the liberty to write out the shortened words in Spanish.

Below each entry is an English translation and a somewhat modernized Tagalog spelling of the Tagalog portions of the entries. These translations and modernizations are my own, which means they will be flawed in several different ways. I am always open to correction.

The purpose of using such old words and defining them from one of the oldest known Tagalog dictionaries is to help readers peer into the world of the Tagalogs that Catholic missionaries attempted to record. I also want readers to see the flaws and biases of the very few chroniclers we have from seventeenth-century Luzon.

Chapter 1 – Bayugin

Hombre) Bayogin (pp) a mujorado en todo, binabayogin. 1.P. ser llamado así o tenido por media hombre, bayoging ca cundi mo gauin. 1. ruin seas o medio hombre sino lo hiçieres.~

Man) Bayugin (pp) effeminate in all things, binabayugin. 1.P. to be called this or considered half a man, bayugin ka kung di mo gawin. 1. you will be a wretch or half a man if you do not do it.~

Chapter 2 – Anito

Ofrenda) Anito (pp) que hacian por qual quiera cosa que acababan como banca casa red. &c. era de petates frutas de sarten oro y otras cosas, la catalonan asistia y la hacia, llamavan alli las animas de sus parientes y amigos pidiendo salud favor. &c. la ofrenda aunque fuese de oro la davan a la catalonan,

tagaanito. 2.ac. hacer esta ofrenda, pinagaanitohan. 2.P. el por quien la hacian.~

Offering) Anito (pp) what they do when whatever thing they finish, like a bangka (boat), house, or (fishing) net. &c. These are mats, fruits, frying pans, gold, and other things, the katalonan (priestess) attends to and does it, they call the souls of their relatives and friends asking for health and favors. &c. The offerings, even when they were gold, are given to the katalonan, tagaanito o.2.ac. to do this offering, pinagaanituhan. 2.P. the one who they were doing it for.~

Chapter 3 – Katalonan

Ministro) Catolonan (pp) delas diabluras y anitos antiguos destos, tenianles grandisimo temorpos que creian les podian matar y dar vida con sus hechizos (necedad) eran mugeres de ordinario.

Minister) Katalonan (pp) of the devilry and of the former anitos, they had grandiose tremors and were believed to give life and death with their spells (foolishness) they were ordinary women.

Chapter 4 – Simbahan

Iglesia) Simbahan (pp) lugar donde adora a Dios. Vi. Misal)
nagsisimbahan. 2.ac. hacer Iglesia, uala camon simbahan no
teneis Iglesia? Magsimbahan como, haced una iglesia.~

Church) Simbahan (pp) place where one worships God. See.
Mass) nagsisimbahan. 2.ac. to go to Church, wala kang
simbahan? You do not have a Church? Magsimbahan ka, go to
church.~

Chapter 5 – Kasalanan

Pecado) Casalanang (pp) hecho y cometido contra Dios, abs) de
fala, que es yeiro porque el que peca yerra, marami sa buhangin
ang manga casalanang co, mas son mis pecados que las
arenas..~

*Sin) Kasalanan (pp) deed and task contrary to God, abs) in
speech, what an error because he who sins errs, marami sa
buhangin ang mga kasalanang ko, my sins are more than the
sands.~*

Chapter 6 – Binabae

Muger) Babayi (pp) qual quiera, nagbababayi .2.ac. hazerse muger o vestirse como tal, binababayi. 1.P. ser tenido por tal, babayinin, llamavan a unos que andavan vestidos de mugeres y fervian como tales por de tras, houag cang magbabayi, no te hagas muger, binabayi ca, tiene te por muger.

Woman) Babae (pp) any woman, nagbababae. 2.ac. to become a woman or dress like one, binababae. 1.P. to be held as one, babaenin, to call someone who walks and dresses as a woman and act like one, huwag kang magbabae, do not become a woman, binabae ka, you have become a woman.

Chapter 7 – Binyag

Baptismo) Binyag (pc) rejeneracion espiritual, namiminyag. 3.ac, baptizar a muchos, nininyag. 3. baptizar a uno, napabibinyag. 7. pedir baptism, inibinyagan. 1.P. ser baptizado, alang Padre ang ninyag sa iyo? que Padre te baptizo? imp) pabinyag ca sa Padre, pide al Padre que te baptice.

Baptism) Binyag (pc) spiritual regeneration, namiminyag. 3.ac, to baptize many, nininyag. 3. To baptize one, napabibinyag. 7.

Request baptism, inibinyagan. 1.P. to be baptized, walang Padre ang ninyag sa iyo? which Father baptized you? Imp) pabinyag ka sa Padre, ask the Father to baptize you.

Chapter 8 – Magasawa

Casados) Asaua (pp) el o ella, magasaua, casado y casada. 1. daluang magasaua, daluang pag asaoan, dos casados, nagkatoto camong mag asawa? conçertais tu y tu muger? may asaua ca? eres casada?

Married) Asawa (pp) he or she, magasawa, husband and wife. 1. dalawang magasawa, dalawang pagasawan, two married persons/two spouses, nagkatoto kang mag asawa? have you and your woman arranged to be married? may asawa ka? are you married?

Chapter 9 – Palayan

Sementera) Palayan (pp) L. de regadio, nagpapalayan. 2.ac. haçerla, pinapalayanan. 1.P. ser la tierra hecha sementera destas, palayanin mo yaring lupa, haz aqui sementera de agua ~

Farm/Field) Palayan (pp) the irrigated kind, nagpapalayan. 2.ac. to make one, pinapalayanan. 1.P. to make the land into a farm, palayanin mo yaring lupa, make this a field of water [a rice paddy] ~

Chapter 10 – Hilot

Comadre) Hilot (pp) que tiene por oficio comadrear alas preñadas, hingmihilot. 1. ac. usar oficio de hiloteria, o comadre, sino ang hilot dito sa bayan? quien es la comadre en este pueblo?~

Midwife) Hilot (pp) that has the job of delivering those who are pregnant, himihilot .1. ac. to do the job of a hiloteria, or midwife, sino ang hilot dito sa bayan? who is the midwife here in town?~

Chapter 11 – Manananggal

Brujo) Magtatangal (pp) diçen que buela y come carne humana, y quando le banta el buelo lleva nomas del medio cuerpo y el otro medio deja en casa, neçedad, y nochica.~

Witch [masculine or gender-neutral]) Manananggal (pp) they say it flies and eats human flesh, and when it rises in flight, it carries

nothing more than half of its body and leaves the other half in the house, foolishness, and nochica [nochica is unknown in Spanish, Tagalog, or Latin]. ~

Chapter 12 – Pandot

Sacrificio) Pandot (pc) solemne que haçian antiguamente como pascoa, nagpapandot. 2.ac. haçerle ypinagpapandot. a.P. el porquien, pinagpapandotan el lugar, mamamandot. Ver.a) el ministro que le haçia. Vi Idolatria) y sabras que es.~

Sacrifice) Pandot (pc) what they formerly and solemnly did, like Easter, nagpapandot. 2.ac. to do it ipinagpapandot. a.P. the one for whom, pinagpapandutan, the place, mamamandot. See) the minister, who does it. See Idolatry) and you will know what it is.~

Idolatria) Pandot (pc) esta era la mas solemne que haçian. Vi. Sacrificio para los verbos) Quando hacian esta solemne idolatria el pueblo se hallava en ella chicos y grandes, y haçiase en el campo a la sombra del arbol Balete, y de noche. Todos llevaban algo de comer, y que ofreçer como petates, algodón, y otras cosas, y esto que llevaban lo colgavan de los arboles, y lo

dejavan alli, y comian, y bevian hasta caer, y esto se haçia para aplacar al anito que deçia la catolonan estava enojado.

Idolatry) Pandot (pc) this is the solemn event that they had. See. Sacrifice for the verbs) When they did this solemn idolatry, the whole town [did it], the young and the old, and it was done in a field under a Balete tree, in the night. Everyone brought something to eat, and then offered things like mats, cotton, and other things, and this they brought to hang in the trees, and they left them hung, and ate, and drank until they became drunk, and they do this to appease the anito that the katalonan says is angry.

Chapter 13 – Mabuhay

Vivir) Buhay (pp) vida mortal y corruptible. Vi. Bivir) dile ca dapat mabuhay, no mereçes vivir.

To Live) Buhay (pp) corruptible mortal life. See. To Live) hindi ka dapat mabuhay, you do not deserve to live.

Chapter 14 – Kuha

Violar) Coha (pp) la virjen, nacocoha ang pagcaborhin, violar la donçella. Vi. Desflorar) ~

Violate) Kuha (pp) the virgin, nakukuha ang pagkaborhin, violate the maiden. See. Deflower) ~

Chapter 15 – Kumpisal

Confesar) Compisal (pc) C. el sacerdote al penitente, nagcocompisal. 2.ac. confesarse alguno, nagpapacompisal. 5. confesar el Padre, pinapagcocompisal. 5.P. ser confesado el penitente, pinagcocompisan. 2. el con quien se confiesa, saang ca nagcompisal? adonde te cofesaste? aling Padre ang pinagcompisan mo. 1. aling Padre ang nagpacompisal sa iyo? que Padre te confeso?~

Confess) Kumpisal (pc) C. the sacrament of penitent, nagkukumpisal. 2.ac. to confess something to him, nagpakumpisal. 5. confess to the Father, pinapagkukumpisal. 5.P. to confess the penitent, pinagkukumpisan. 2. with who they confess, saang ka nagkumpisal? where do you confess?

aling Padre ang pinagkumpisalan mo. 1. aling Padre ang nagpakumpisal sa iyo? what Father do you confess to?~

Chapter 16 – Kalag

Absolver) Calag (pc). el confesor al penitente, metas) de calag que es desatar porque le desatadesus peccalos, cqinacalagan.

1.P. ser uno absuelto, imp) calagan aco nang Padre nang kasalana ko, absuelva me el Padre de mis pecados, sinong cung macalag sa tao cundi ang Padreng Sacerdote? quien absuelbe sino el Padre Saçerdote? calagan cata nang manga sal mo, absoluerete. Vi. Borrar)~

To Absolve) Kalag (pc). the confessor to the penitent, the aim of kalag is to unbind because it unbinds us from our sins, kinakalagan. 1.P. to be absolved, imp) kalagan ako ng Padre ng kasalanan ko, the Father absolves me of my sins, sinong kung makalag sa tao kundi ang Padreng Sacerdote? who absolves but the Father Priest? kalagan ka ng mga sala mo, absolve yourself. See. Erase)~

Chapter 17 – Sumbong

Chismear) Sombong (pc) diçiendo todo lo que ve,
nagsosombong. 2.ac. chismear, ypinagsosombong. 2.P. ser uno
chismeado, pinagsosombonggan. 2. lo q diçe o chismeas, imp)
duvagcang mag sombong, no chismees, at akoy ypinagsombong
mo? por que chismeaste demi?~

*Gossip) Sumbong (pc) to say everything that one sees,
nagsusumbong. 2.ac. gossip, ipinagsusumbong. 2.P. to be a
gossiper, pinagsusumbonggan .2. what they say or gossip about,
imp) huwag kang magsumbong, do not gossip, at ako'y
ipinagsumbong mo? why do you gossip about me? ~*

Chapter 18 – Pagdarahitan

Astillero) Pagdarahitan (pp) lugar donde hacen el navio, sale del
pasado dahil, doon ninio ydahic sa pinagdarahitan, barad la
banca en el astillero.~

*Shipyards) Pagdarahitan (pp) place where the ship is built, comes
from the past tense of dahil, doon ninyo idahik sa
pinagdarahitan, beach the bangka [boat] in the shipyard.~*

Chapter 19 – Alipin

Esclavo) Alipin (pp) cual que sea, ay tres generos, nag aalipin.

2.ac. haçer esclavo a otro, naaalipin. 8. estar hecho esclavo, napaaalipin. 7. haçer se el de su voluntad, ynaalipin. 1.P. ser hecho el libre, aalipinin rau aco. 1. alipnin (sincop) diçen que me quieren haçer esclavo.~

Slave) Alipin (pp) or the like, there are three types, nagaalipin.

2.ac. to make one a slave, naaalipin. 8. to be enslaved, napaaalipin. 7. to voluntarily become a slave, inaalipin. 1.P. to be made free or liberated, aalipinin raw ako. 1. alpnin (syncope) they say you want to make me a slave.~

Chapter 20 – Kalis

Espada) Calis (pp) que trae el Castilla al lado, nagcacalis. 2.ac.

traer espada, cqinacalis. 1.P. ser herido con ella, nangangalis.

3.ac. andar hiriendo a todos con la espada, cqinalis niya, y, pinisanan, hirirole con la espada y cayo muerto de repente.~

Sword) Kalis (pp) what the Castilian carries to the side,

nagkakalis. 2.ac. to carry a sword, kinakalis. 1.P. to be wounded by it, nangangalis. 3.ac. they went about slashing everyone with

the sword, kinalis niya, and, pinisanan, he fell by the sword and suddenly died.~

Chapter 21 – Saubat

Amistad) Saobat (pp) de dos o mas, nagsasaobat. 2.ac. travar amistad dos o mas, ysinasaobat. 1.1. ypinag sasaobat. 2.P. ser tomado por amigo, imp) magsaobat como ni Pili, travad amistad tu y Pili, indi ko siya ypag sasaobat, no quiero su amistad.~

Friendship) Saubat (pp) of two or more, nagsasaubat. 2.ac. to make a friendship of two or more, isinasaubat. 1.1.

ipinagsasaubat. 2.P. to be taken as a friend, imp) magsaubat ka ni Pili, take Pili into friendship/become friends with Pili, hindi ko siya ipagsasaubat, I do not want their friendship.~

Chapter 22 – Bathala

Dios) Bathala (pp) ansi llamavan antes estos a. N.S.D. que aun que adoravan sus Antios Lichas y Diablillos, confesavan confesavan [sic] aver un solo Dios y Señor de todo, al cual llamavan Bathalang may capal sa lahat. 1. Dios que todo lo hizo, aun que segun otros, se toma por el mayor de sus Anitos, set non congrue.

God) Bathala (pp) what they used to call Our Lord God when they still worshipped their Anitos Likhas [images] and little devils, they confessed to having only one God and Lord of all, whom they called Bathalang May Kapal sa Lahat [Bathala, Creator of All]. 1. God who made everything, although according to others, he is taken as the greatest of their Anitos, set non congrue [possible Latin for 'but not appropriate'] .

Chapter 23 – Datu

Cabo) Dato (pp) de barangay, nagdarato. 2.ac. ser cabo de alguna ente, dinadato. 1.P. ser hecho cabo, pinapagdadato. 5.ft. forçalle a que sea dato, pinagdadatoan. 2. la gente que gobierna, imp) mag dato ca, s cabo del barangay, pagdatoan mo itong manga tauo, se cabo desta jente, acoy pinapag dato, y, dico loob, hiçieron me cabo aunque no quise.~

Head) Datu (pp) of the barangay [village], nagdaratu. 2.ac. to be the head of an entity, dinadatu. 1.P. to be made head, pinapagdadatu. 5.ft. to be forced to be a datu, pinagdadatuan. 2. the people being governed, imp) magdatu ka, to be head of a barangay, pagdatuhan mo itong mga tao, be head of these

people, ako'y pinapagdatu, at, hindi ko loob, they made me head, but I do not want to be head.~

Chapter 24 – Linga

Idolo) Linga (pc) otro diablo lo a quien tambien llamavan estando enfermos.~

Idol) Linga (pc) another devil whom they also call upon when they are sick.~

Chapter 25 – Lakapati

Idolo) Lacapati (pp) era el abogado de las sementeras, figura de hombre y muger todo junto, la ofrenda de cosas de comer para aplacalle. Quando sembravan llevavan los hijos y enseñavan selos diciendo, lacapate pacanin mo yaring alipin mo, houag mong gotomin (Neçedades)~

Idol) Lakapati (pp) was the advocate of the fields, in the form of a man and a woman together as one, the offering is things they eat to appease them. When they sowed their fields, they would bring their children and would teach them to say, Lakapati, pakainin

*mo yaring alipin mo, huwag mong gutumin [Lakapati, feed this
thy slave, let them not hunger] (Foolishness)~*

Chapter 26 – Pananampalataya

Fe) Pananangpalataya (pp) del Christiano. 1. pagsangpalataya,
sale de sangpalataya. Vi. Creer) matibay ang pananangpalataya
mo saating. P. Dios? tienes firme fe con dios?~

*Faith) Pananampalataya (pp) of a Christian. 1. pagsangpalataya,
which comes from sangpalataya. See. Believe) matibay ang
pananamapalataya mo sa atin. God the Father? do you have
strong faith in God? ~*

Chapter 27 – Babasuhan

Prueba) Baso (pp) delos muchachos antes que seden en las
pantorillas, nagbabaso. 2.ac. probar an si binabasoan. 1.P. ser
prouado, babasoang co, provare si esta bien puesto.~

*Try) Baso (pp) of the young men before they give into the lower
legs/calves [a reference to calf wrestling which is popular among
the Mountain Region today?], nagbabaso. 2.ac. to try is*

binabasuhan. 1.P. to be tested, babasuhan ko, try it to see if it is in a good place.~

Chapter 28 – Pagsisihan

ARepentirse) Sisi (pp) de los mal hecho, nagsisisi. 2.arrepentir se asi, ypinagsisisi. 1. pinagsisisihan. 2.P. la cosa de que se arrepiente, magsisi ca nang casalanan mo, arrepiente te de tus peccados, .1. ipagsisi mo ang casalan mo. 1. pagsisihan mo ang casalan mo.~

Repent) Sisi (pp) of bad actions, nagsisisi. 2. to repent as such, ipinagsisisi. 1. pinagsisisihan. 2.P. the thing which is being repented of, magsisi ka ng kasalanan mo, repent of your sins, .1. ipagsisi mo ang kasalanan mo. 1. pagsisihan mo ang kasalanan mo.~

The *bayugin* was a class of powerful and historical gender-fluid animist shamans who lived in the Philippines when Spain first began to colonize the islands. Assigned male at birth, the *bayugin* would take on a feminine lifestyle, habits, clothing, and roles throughout their life. More importantly, they took on the mantle of the indigenous religion and were known to be powerful shamans and mediums. In a sense, the *bayugin* could be considered the ancestor of the modern-day *bakla* in the Philippines. One could even go as far as to call the *bayugin* an ancestor to the modern-day transwoman.

The novel *Bayugin* explores the world of pre-colonial Philippines undergoing a radical cultural and political transformation with the advent of Spanish colonization and Catholic conversions. A historical novel, *Bayugin* attempts to explore what happened to the calling of bayugin and how queer persons adapted to the coming of European colonization and religion. The novel follows a series of fictional characters inspired by various historical events that European chroniclers recorded during their takeover of the islands.

Bayugin wrestles with the questions of religion, authority, gender, and queerness. Can Christianity hold a place for queer people? Does the modern-day persecution of queer people, especially transpersons, reflect the persecution queer people experienced in other historical periods? Is queerness a human right? Equally important, *Bayugin* works to bring Philippine history to light and draw more attention to this fascinating, rich, and forgotten history.